



A TWO-BIT RANCHER MAKES WAR ON TEXAS!

DIE, DAMN YOU!

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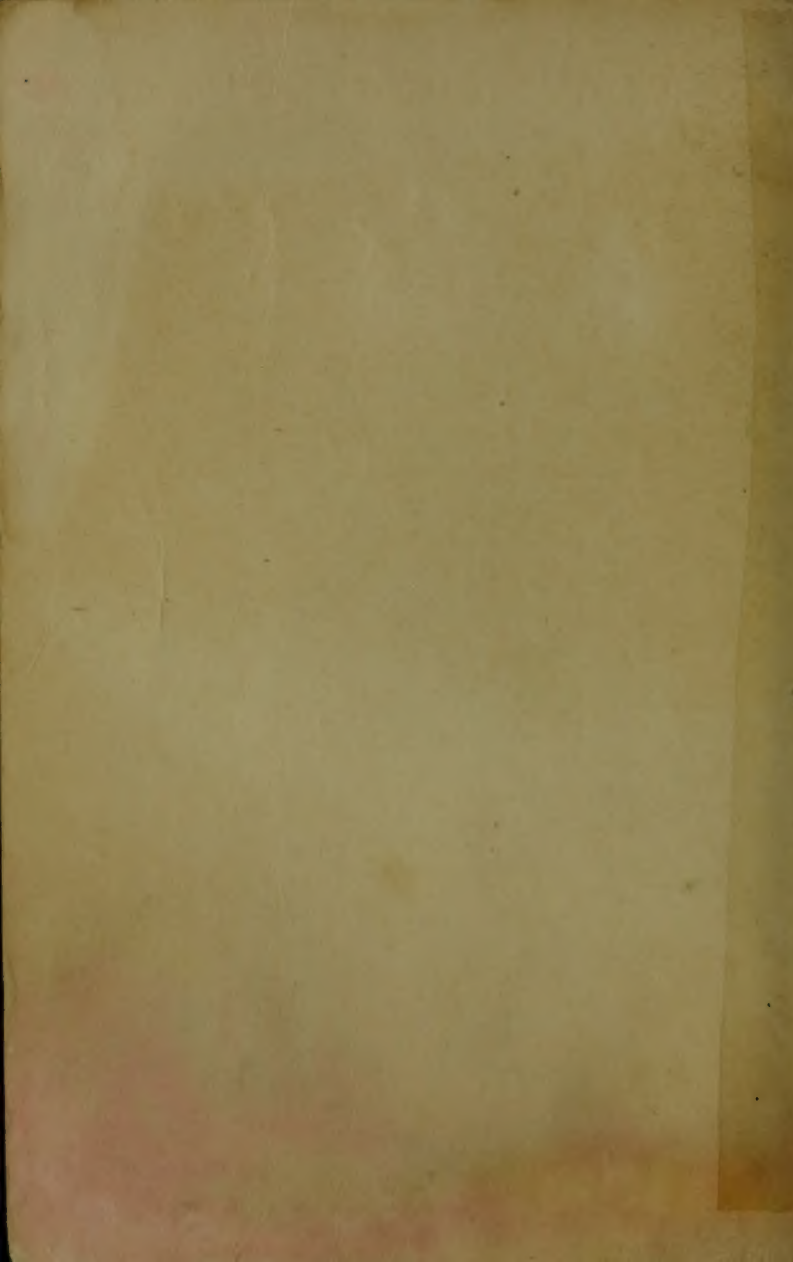
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A WYOMING RANCHER

FACES TEXAS GUNS

They stood there in the dusty street, swaying, bloody, two gasping giants of the earth in a bitter fight to the death. And then Driskill swung one heavy fist, and he felt the soft-hard collapse of teeth and sinew, and the man in front of him crumpled and faded to the ground.

Driskill reeled away, sickened by his own blood, every breath a torrent of pain. And then from behind, there were two more of them, closing in, guns drawn.

And Driskill knew it was no use. No matter how many he beat down into the Texas dust, another man took his place. He had made war on this slumbering, evil Texas town . . . and now he was paying for it, with his life's blood.

a novel of the West

by PAUL DURST



DIE, DAMN YOU!

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CHAPTER ONE

SOMEWHERE up ahead, the rider thought, he'd find the man. A thousand miles it had been, from Wyoming's sharp peaks right on through to the thick lush green of Texas. Now it was finished. And the last little flicker of hate went coursing through his body.

He sat his horse and looked into the valley ahead, where the purple shadows of Texas night were beginning to gather. There was a time, he remembered, when he was filled with hate, when he could have killed the man in a moment of wild fury. Kill him, he still would, but the sharp, flaming savagery he once knew so well was gone, now that he was here. What emotion there was had gradually worn itself away over the long weary miles. He looked at the river and he thought of the trail over which he'd come. A thousand miles or more, down across Wyoming across a corner of Colorado, Kansas, the Indian Territory. Bitter miles of hate. It ended here, the trail did. Here where the broad valley of the Canadian marked its way across the arid plains of the Texas Panhandle.

A thousand miles and two long, bitter years. And now, he'd been told, he could find the man here.

The rider leaned over and laid the cigarette in the stirrup, mashing it out with his foot. He straightened up, pulled his hat more firmly on his head and turned the roan toward the cow that grazed a few yards behind. A grim smile crossed his face when he thought of the way he'd brought the cow with him. There'd been many a stare as he'd passed along the way. Some folks, no doubt, thought he was just plain loco. Nobody ever moved cattle *down* the trail to Texas. Not with the railheads up the line in Kansas. Besides, who'd

ever be crazy enough to herd a single critter for a thousand miles?

"Name's Clint Driskill," he'd told those whose curiosity had led them to ask. "That's right, you heard what I said. I'm driving one cow all the way to Texas. One lone, skinny old domino cow. There's a man down in the Panhandle I'm giving her to. Man name of Cober. Fred Cober."

Then he'd ride on, leaving them to shake their heads as they stared after him. He'd smile a little when they couldn't see his face. It was a kind of joke. A damn grim joke. Maybe Fred Cober would hear he was coming—with one lone cow. Fred Cober would know what it meant. But he wouldn't smile at the joke.

The long Texas twilight lingered in the wide sky overhead as Clint Driskill moved the foot-weary cow before him across the valley. Smoke from a clump of cottonwoods caught his eye. He marked the place as belonging to a small cattleman, a nester, maybe. That was alright. Clint was a cattleman through and through, but he'd been firm in his belief that the Almighty and the United States Government meant this land to be big enough for everybody. Besides, Clint leaned a bit in favor of these little people with just a toehold in the wilderness around them. Maybe because he'd started out little once himself.

There was scant light left when he drove the cow into the clearing where the cabin stood. He ran his eyes around and confirmed his previous guess. There were several horses in the pole corral that only a cattleman would have. From an outbuilding he caught the sound of chickens night-talking as they settled down. A wagon stood in the yard. They all looked alike, these places. Like they were licked before they'd got started.

Somewhere a dog barked suddenly. The cow went stiff-legged, her big eyes wide with fear of the dog. A man appeared in the yellow rectangle of light that was the cabin door. There was a rifle in his hand.

"Who's here?" The challenge rang sharply across the clearing as he peered out into the dusk.

"Name's Driskill," Clint answered. "From Wyomin', pass-

ing through. I'm new to this country. Like to ask a few questions."

"Get down and come up where I can see you." The man sounded like he might be expecting trouble, Clint thought.

"Mighty touchy about strangers, aren't you, mister?" Clint said with a grin as he stepped into the square of light. The man didn't answer. He just stood looking Clint up and down. Then he said, "Lead your horse up here so's I can see him."

Clint wondered about that, but did as he was told. The man looked the roan over, then stood the rifle inside against the wall.

"How come you wanted to see my horse?" Clint asked, relieved to see the gun put away.

"You said you hailed from Wyomin'. I wanted a look at your rig. No Texas man would have any use for a double cinch, that's mountain rig. When I saw that I knew you spoke the truth."

The man moved down the steps toward Clint and stuck out his hand. "Howdy, Driskill. My name's Martin. Jake Martin. Unsaddle and turn the roan in my corral. We was just about to set down to supper when you rode up. We'll wait for you."

"That's decent of you, Martin," Clint said sincerely. "Home-cooked grub sounds mighty good after six weeks on the trail." He turned to unsaddle the roan and heard Martin swear softly. "What's the matter?" he asked over his shoulder.

"I see my wife's muley cow busted out again. Guess I'd better fetch her up or the young'un will go without milk in the morning."

"You won't get milk from that critter," Clint grinned. "I brought her along with me and she's dry as a bone." He watched Martin's stare grow wider.

"You—you mean you brought that cow all the way from Wyomin'?"

Clint nodded soberly, leading the roan toward the corral. Martin followed. Clint knew the man was waiting to hear about the cow, but wouldn't be so impolite as to say so. He just stood watching as Clint dumped his saddle astride a

corral pole, then let the roan through the gate and slipped off the bridle.

"You can wash up out back," Martin told him.

"Thanks," Clint said, trying not to smile at the way Martin kept looking from him to the cow and back again.

When he had washed and combed his hair Clint walked up to the cabin, a two-room affair, its neatness speaking well of the woman who lived there. The walls were rough-cut soft lumber, cottonwood, Clint guessed, whitewashed and sparkling clean. Martin introduced his wife and Clint acknowledged with a smile. The woman was young and had been pretty once. But fear in her eyes made the lines in her face more pronounced. A tow-headed youngster of three or four was peering out from behind his mother's skirts. It made a lump come in Clint's throat as he saw the look on the youngster's face. Even the kids, he thought. They sat down to eat.

"Reckon I owe you an apology for the welcome you got," Martin said a little sheepishly.

"Had trouble hereabouts?" Clint asked conversationally. He saw the look that passed between Martin and his wife. "A little," Martin said. Clint didn't pry any further.

When they'd eaten, Clint rolled a cigarette and Martin filled his pipe while the woman put the boy to bed.

"I'd like to see that Wyomin' country sometime," Martin said, "but don't know as I could stand the winters up there."

Clint started to answer when his ears caught the sound of hoofbeats. He saw Martin stiffen. The woman came out of the other room and gave her husband a worried glance. Martin stood up and went to the door. Clint stayed where he was, his chair propped against the wall beside the door where he could hear what went on outside. Martin stood with his hand on the rifle, but he didn't pick it up this time.

There were two riders, Clint judged from the sound of the hoofbeats. They'd been here before, too, from the way they rode straight up to the door. He listened but didn't hear them dismount.

"What do you want?" he heard Martin ask. There was recognition but no friendliness in the voice.

"Don't get edgy, Martin," one of the riders answered. "We've just come to see if you mightn't have changed your mind about selling."

"For the last time, Bartow, this place ain't for sale!" Clint watched Martin's knuckles go white as the man's grip tightened on the rifle barrel still against the wall inside. There was a hollow laugh from the man called Bartow.

"Been mighty dry around here lately, ain't it Martin?"

Clint was thinking that the pattern was familiar. Always there was a big one around to prod the little people. He was remembering a time in Wyoming . . .

"What are you driving at, Bartow?" Martin said huskily.

"Mighty dry," Bartow went on, musingly. "Lot of dry wild hay here on the river bottom. If I was you, Martin, I'd watch the sparks from my chimney in these dry spells. If a fire ever got started around here . . ."

"Damn you, get out!" Martin roared.

Bartow's hollow laugh came again. Clint saw that Martin's hand quivered as it gripped the rifle barrel. But he knew, now, why the man didn't pick it up. These men were picked for their cold-blooded ability with a gun, they always were. And when a man had a wife and a kid he'd think twice before starting anything.

"Cober ain't gonna like your refusin' his offer, Martin! He . . ."

At the sound of the name Clint exploded to his feet. Shoving his host aside he stepped down into the yard. The two men looked at him strangely, startled to see another man there. Clint addressed the nearest one, which he guessed was Bartow.

"Did I hear you mention the name of Cober?" he asked casually.

Bartow was a tall, rangy man with the nervous quickness of a gunman. "Maybe I did and maybe I didn't. Who's askin'?"

"The name is Driskill. Clint Driskill. Know any more than you did?"

Clint watched the faces of the two before him. If they recognized the name they didn't let on. Chances were,

though, that Cober hadn't said too much about that. Things have a way of getting around to the wrong people when you talk too much. No, these two didn't know Clint Driskill.

The man with Bartow rode up a little closer and peered down at Clint. "He looks mighty like a sheepherder, don't he Ed?"

Ed Bartow laughed his hollow laugh. "Reckon he is? Come to think of it, I thought I smelled something kinda bad when we rode up." They both laughed at that, but Clint didn't change expression.

"You probably did," he said laconically, "you were riding downwind from yourselves all the way."

Bartow's face sobered and he turned to Martin. "Martin, you'd better tell your proddy friend here to pull in his horns. Me and Cal here ain't used to takin' insults."

Clint heard Martin's easy voice behind him say, "Then I reckon you'd better stop actin' too big for your britches, Bartow."

Cal dug his elbow in Bartow's ribs and winked. "Look, Ed. The sheepherder carries a gun. Now what do you suppose that's for?"

"I don't know," Bartow said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "You don't reckon he knows how to shoot it, do you?"

Clint was thinking of the woman and the kid inside. If there was gunplay a slug could easily penetrate the thin board wall. "Now hold on," he said angrily. "There's a woman and a little boy inside there and we don't want them to get hurt. Now why don't you two just . . ."

He knew the minute he'd said it that the two bullies would mistake his caution for cowardice. The man called Cal rode forward until his right stirrup was barely touching Clint's stomach.

"I reckon he is a sheepherder, Ed. He ain't got no guts!"

Clint saw the stirrup start to move as the man's foot lashed out at his face. He ducked, then came up fast under the leg, grabbing the man's ankle. With the leg for a lever he pulled down hard. The surprised Cal found himself thrown over Clint's shoulder to the ground where he hit hard, the wind gone out of him.

Clint spun around fast, reaching for his gun. But Ed

Bartow showed no inclination to draw. The reason was, Clint saw, that Jake Martin was balancing his rifle in his hand, the business end pointed toward Bartow's chest.

"I'm sorry, Jake," Clint said apologetically, "I didn't mean to stir up trouble. I just wanted to ask these hombres a question or two."

"Don't bother apologizin', Driskill," the big man grinned, "I downright enjoyed the show."

Clint felt a sudden bond of friendship for this big man who didn't scare easily. He had to admire Jake Martin's courage. But it made him just a little sad, too. Sometimes the smart ones were those who took their wives and kids and moved out before it was too late. A man like Fred Cober could be held off just so long.

"Look out, Driskill!"

Clint whirled around, cursing the stupidity that had let him turn his back on Cal. He was just in time to see the man leaning groggily against the house and the spurt of orange flame that leaped from the gun in his fist.

CHAPTER TWO

CLINT OWED his life to Jake Martin's warning. The yell caused the groggy gunman to shoot before he was ready. From his unsteady hand the shot went wild. He didn't get a second chance.

Clint came in like a striking rattler. One hand clamped the gunman's wrist and flung it wide. He balled the other into a fist and brought it down hard on the man's mouth. Teeth and bone gave way. The man called Cal wouldn't fight again that night.

Clint turned to Bartow. "I told you boys I didn't want any gunplay. But I guess since you didn't take me seriously we'll have to do this my way from here on out."

With a nod to Martin, Clint came up on Bartow's far side. He slid the man's gun from its holster and threw it on the ground by the house. Then he told Bartow to lie belly-down across the saddle.

"Look, Driskill," the man protested, "it's near fifteen mile we gotta go. It'd kill a man to ride that far on his guts!"

"You seem to think you've got enough to go around," Clint grinned, "now's the time to find out."

When Bartow started to argue again Clint nodded toward the writhing Cal. "You want to go like him, Bartow—or with a full set of teeth?" His grin was gone. Bartow swore softly and lay on his belly across the horse as Clint lifted the rope from his saddle.

If Cal hadn't tried so hard to kill him, Clint might have felt sorry for him. "Your mouth's going to throb like hell, riding all that way face down. But, I don't know, maybe it'll teach you when to keep it shut."

When both men were securely fastened to their mounts

Clint stood between them. "Now we'll pick up the conversation where we were before you two got playful. I gather you know a man named Cober. I even might guess you work for him—you're about the right breed of snake. Well, I want you to take him a sociable message for me. Tell him Clint Driskill is here. Tell him I've got a cow for him, a tired old domino I herded all the way down from Wyomin'. It's kind of a present, you might say. He'll know what you mean. And you can tell him that I'll be in town at the hotel when he wants to come collect his cow. I'll be waiting for him."

He stepped back and slapped both animals smartly on their rumps. Then he stood beside Jake Martin until the galloping shadows were lost in the starlight and the sound of the hoofbeats was deadened by the soft sand along the river.

"I like the way you handle yourself, Driskill," Martin said with admiration. "We need more men like you in these parts."

"I guess I'll be around awhile—now," Clint said soberly. Then the sober look left his face and he grinned at Martin. "I guess by this time you're busting inside about that cow of mine?"

Martin scratched his head, "W-e-l-l-l, it does seem a mite funny—a man herdin' a cow all that way to give to a man he don't seem to care for particularly."

"Let's go inside and I'll tell you about it."

Inside, Clint leaned the chair against the wall again and Jake knocked the cold ashes from his pipe. His woman came out, and this time she smiled at Clint. Clint was glad to see her smile. It took some of the lines from around her face and let her prettiness come through.

"The shot woke Billy, but he went right back to sleep," she said.

"Clint, here, was just about to tell me about this cow he brought along. I don't reckon he'd mind if you listened in," Jake told her.

Clint nodded affably and she sat at the table where she could sew by the lamp and listen.

"As you've probably guessed by now," Clint began, blow-

ing smoke up at the ceiling and with his eyes growing far away, "I knew Fred Cober up in Wyomin'. It was a little over two years ago this spring that I first ran across him."

Clint's voice was soft and low in the quiet of the simple cabin. But there was a timbre to the softness more potent than any oratory. He told them of a man named Cober. A big bully of a man. He told them how this man Cober was foreman of a big cattle empire. An empire that had grown because Cober burned and raided the little people who stood in the way. Cober had been well paid. But pay alone wasn't enough. He wanted power and he knew how to get it.

There had been a young cattleman named Clint Driskill who had gone with his bride to homestead along Wind River where the majestic Tetons hold up the distant western sky and there was land to be had as far as the eye could see. Land that Cober wanted. Young Driskill had stood alone after most of the others had been scared away. He had defied Cober before God to move him from that range.

There had been a cold, windy night in the late fall when the baby was due. The only doctor was at a settlement forty miles away. The doctor was needed, for the pain of labor had stopped and Clint had seen the desperate pleading look in his wife's eyes.

Forty miles is a long way by buckboard in the threatening cold of early winter. Clint had prayed every mile of the way. Then, when the rig with its burden of woman and unborn child had swung into the settlement, they met Cober. The bully had fired a few harmless shots through the bed of the buckboard, playfully.

Clint buried his wife and the child he would never see on the following day. It was then the hate was born. When he returned to the lonely homestead along Wind River he found only smoldering logs. Nothing remained except one cow the raiders had somehow missed.

Indignation spread through the ranches, large and small. But it was too late. Cober was gone. Clint began anew, rebuilding from the ground up. He was able to buy a few head of cattle, but he kept one cow separate from the rest. For two years he kept that one cow, in a corral near the cabin. It was to be a present for a man named Cober. Someday, word

would come. Someday the questions asked of the passing riders would bring an answer. The word came.

Clint finished his story and stopped to fumble in his pocket for makings. "So that's the way it is," he said finally. "I figure Cober took everything else I had, so I don't see why he shouldn't have that one lone cow. I'm going to give her to him. Not for free, exactly. He'll pay for her." Clint held the match to the smoke he'd made. "He'll pay . . . with his life."

Jake Martin leaned back against the corral and watched Clint saddle the roan in the early morning light. "I hate like the devil to think of you ridin' into Desperado City alone. Now that Cober knows you're here. I feel I ought to go with you, but . . ." he waved his hand to take in the cabin and the land beyond.

Clint gave the latigo a final tug and grinned. "You got trouble enough of your own, Jake. But thanks for the offer." He turned and offered his hand. "And thanks for the hospitality."

Jake took the hand Clint held out to him. "Think it over, Clint. You're mighty welcome to stay on here."

Clint shook his head. "If you're afraid Cober will meet me with a gun, you're wrong. I only wish he would. He'll stay holed up where I can't get at him. It'll take time."

"He's got a lot of men to do dirty work for him," Jake warned.

Clint grinned again. "I know two that won't be too eager!"

Jake Martin laughed, but there was a look in his eye that said he wished Clint would change his mind. Given a little time to organize the small ranchers about, a man like Driskill could do a lot of good. Dead, he would be just another name scratched off Fred Cober's book.

"How many of you stand between Cober and what he wants?" Clint asked as he upmounted.

"Let's see," Jake said thoughtfully. "Just west of here's Pete Wieber with a couple of sections. Then farther up there's Mal Turpin and Jeb Ash. We're the four Cober's pushin' hard right now. There's good wild hay in the river

bottom and good grazing on the upslope. Cober could use both. Besides, it would give him a clear sweep to the table land over the rimrock."

"Only four of you?" Clint said disappointedly.

"Oh, there's maybe six or seven others, but Cober's got them 'bout half scared off. Might count on 'em in a pinch."

"If things started to go our way?"

"They'd throw in."

Clint looked out toward the river, thinking over what had been said. Then he looked down at Jake. "I'm interested, Martin. Might be a good way to bring this to a head. One thing stops me, though."

"What's that?"

"My score's with Cober on personal grounds. If I threw in with your crowd openly, somebody might get hurt. It might look to some like I'd be using you to help me fight my battle. I wouldn't want that."

Jake nodded. "You're a man, Driskill, to look at it like that. It wouldn't've occurred to me. But I'll ask around, see what the others think."

"I'll be in town, in case you want to talk to me."

Clint turned the roan to where the woman stood in the door, the child clinging to her skirt. He took off his hat without getting down. "Best cooking I've had in many a moon, ma'am. Hope I can return your kindness someday."

Ellen Martin blushed from the unaccustomed praise. "Nice to hear you say that, Mister Driskill. You're welcome to drop in anytime."

Clint turned away. The cow stood up at the edge of the clearing when she saw him coming. He headed her down the wagon-rut trail that led through the trees.

Desperado City, Clint thought, had been rightly named. There were four saloons along the false-fronted block-long main street. Four saloons and one dry goods store and a hotel. Then the livery and smithy. A few houses, set back a ways, withered grass trying to get a grip in the thin dirt of the small yards.

But what made him think the town had been rightly

named was the men he saw. Lean, weatherbeaten men. Buffalo hunters who wantonly slayed the beasts for the small pay from the railroad survey crews. The railroad crews themselves, hard-bitten men with orders to gain the right of way no matter what the cost. There were others with a mark that set them apart as the worst of the lot. Gunmen for hire, traders in whisky with the Indians just over the line in the Territory, toughs, gamblers—the fringe that gathered where there was a dollar to be had while the law was no closer than the nearest wandering U. S. Marshal or Texas Ranger.

Clint pulled up at the sign that read, McGowan's Livery. The cow thrust her nose through the open door, wrinkling it inquisitively at the smell of hay from the stalls. Clint dismounted and began to untie the saddle strings that held his war sack. Footsteps behind him made him turn.

"Got room for a tired roan and . . ." he broke off as he saw the woman coming toward him. He doffed his hat. "Sorry, ma'am. I'm looking for the proprietor."

"Is there anything wrong with a widow running the livery stable her husband left her?" There was no malice in the question. But Clint was set back a little by the woman's frank way of putting things. Come to think of it, he'd never seen a woman in a business before.

"No ma'am, I didn't mean anything like that! I just took it for granted it'd be a man, that's all." He noticed she was wearing range clothes; denim trousers, flannel shirt and half-boots. And, he had to admit, she wore them well. They made her look taller than she was, he noticed. When she came up to look the roan over she came just below his shoulder.

"This horse could use a rest," she said, looking up at him. He noticed there was a twinkle in her black eyes and he guessed she always had fun watching how men took to finding a woman in a place like this. A pretty woman, too, he noticed. Jet black hair to match her eyes, and a sassy little smile that made him tingle a little. Not that she was forward about it. She struck him as a woman who got tired of crying and decided to laugh along with life instead.

"I'll need two stalls," Clint told her.

"For one horse?" Her eyes were puzzled, then she smiled at him. "If the other one's for yourself, I think you'd be more comfortable across the street at the hotel."

Clint laughed at that. It had been a long time since he'd enjoyed this kind of a laugh and he found himself liking her for it.

"No, the other's for my cow out there."

She looked at him, her eyes dead serious. "You didn't come to Texas to start in the cattle business with one cow, did you?"

"Not quite," he grinned. "Now, have you got room?"

"Always room for one more," she said, taking the cow by the hackamore. "Come on, you poor critter. These animals won't like it, but one more woman around won't make any difference."

Clint was grinning to himself as he unsaddled the roan. Then the grin slowly began to fade from his face. Four men had detached themselves from a group in front of the saloon across the way and were walking toward him. He could tell from the way they were spread out, and by the way they held their arms stiff at their sides, that they weren't coming to pick up their mounts.

CHAPTER THREE

FEAR WAS a brassy taste in Clint's mouth. Four of them. Cober wasn't taking chances.

Two of the men stopped, well apart, near the center of the street. The other two came on. Clint stepped away from the roan. The two men stopped a few feet away. For a long time they just stood there looking him over. Clint's face was a blank, masking the fear inside him. Maybe, he was thinking, he should have stayed with Jake Martin and done this a different way. Maybe, now, he wouldn't even get close to Fred Cober—ever.

The taller of the two spoke first.

"Your name Driskill?"

"Could be. Who's asking?"

The tall man moved a little, spreading his feet ever so slightly. "I'm Stub Langer. Brother to Cal Langer, the man you beat up last night."

"You don't have to apologize for your kinfolk, Langer," Clint said dryly.

"I ain't aimin' to," the man said, stiffening. "I just come here to see if you're as tough as you let on. Beatin' a winded man when he's down don't take much guts."

Clint began to see a way out. Sure, it was a slim chance, but what the hell? There was no doubt that Cober had sent these men to kill him. But this man Langer seemed to want to settle a personal grudge first. And, the way Clint saw it, brother Cal had altered some of the details when he'd told the story. All to the good, he thought. He could hold his own with one man.

"Don't take much guts, either, to make big talk with three men backing you up," Clint said idly. He saw it take effect. "If you'd like to prove yourself," he smiled wryly, in-

dicating he thought Langer didn't, "ask your friends to hold off, and I'll be glad to demonstrate how Cal lost his front teeth. 'Course," he shrugged, "you bein' an older man and all . . ."

There was a snigger from one of the men in the street. Langer took a quick step closer, anger reddening his face. "Damn you, Driskill, I'll make you eat that!"

"I'm not hungry, but you can try."

Stub Langer was so mad his fingers shook as he unbuckled his gun belt and let it drop to the ground.

Clint felt that he was parting with his last friend when he let his own gun belt drop. There wasn't much choice, though. All he could hope for now was that the others would back down if he whipped Langer.

Langer was a good half a head taller and as far as being old—he had about four years on Clint. What's more, he looked to Clint to be the type that would fight as dirty as he knew how.

He was right. Langer struck the first blow—with his knee in Clint's groin. Clint doubled over into the dirt, pain and nausea sweeping over him. He saw Langer's right foot draw back, the pointed boot toe aimed straight at his ribs. He rolled, but the boot caught him a glancing blow that drove more precious air from his lungs. Langer was fast on his feet, stepping in and out, landing a kick in the ribs before Clint could dodge.

Langer paused for a minute to catch his breath. "Hell, this ain't no fight," he laughed evilly. "I thought this bird was supposed to be . . ."

Clint, coming groggily to his hands and knees, suddenly reached out and grabbed the man's ankle. He pulled back with all his strength and Langer sat down hard, surprise showing in his face. As Clint tried to come to his feet, the man lashed out with both of his. The hard boot heels caught Clint in the short ribs and he gasped audibly.

Strange, he found himself thinking, that it should be getting dark so early in the day. Then his vision cleared a little, in time to see Langer standing over him, the rowel of one spur poised over Clint's face. The man's own face was wild with sadistic glee.

"Beg! Damn you, beg just once before I ram this spur through your skull!"

Only the thought of Fred Cober's laughter when he would hear about the way Clint Driskill died—only that could make Clint ask his bruised and aching body to respond just once. He came up under the upraised foot, sent Langer reeling off balance. Then he began to move his arms, despite their seeming weight of lead. In and out he rammed his fists, each resounding crack bringing new life to flow through him. Langer's own pounding fists were something he saw, now, rather than felt. He moved through them, conscious only of the strange way the man's head jerked each time he hit him.

There was a pause when both men gasped painfully for breath, glaring at each other, bloody, stooped, spraddle-legged. Then Clint swung hard, saw Langer's head move feebly to dodge. Once again he felt the soft-hard collapse of teeth and sinew.

Then there was Stub Langer, drawing himself up on hands and knees, spitting blood and cursing feebly, staring at a broken tooth in the palm of his hand. Clint reeled away to support himself against the wall of the building, vaguely conscious of someone helping the beaten Langer to his feet.

Then came another consciousness. Two men closing in, guns drawn. Funny, he thought, he didn't give a damn now. Let them shoot—he was too tired . . .

"Get back where you were and put those guns away fast!"

Clint turned his head painfully at the sound of the woman's voice. She was standing in the doorway of the livery, her black eyes flashing behind the cocked hammers of a double barreled shotgun. Clint grinned, even though it hurt his face to do it. He grinned at the way the two gunmen hesitated, mouths open in astonishment. The girl moved in, prodding at them with her scattergun.

"Back, I told you! Over there where your horses are, and get mounted fast!"

They moved out of town quickly in a cloud of dust, the hatless Langer swaying back and forth, both hands locked firmly on the horn. They threw a furtive glance behind,

then kept on going till the brow of the hill hid them from view.

"Little lady," Clint gasped, "I plain owe you my life for that."

She glared at him with mock severity. "I don't know that I should have done it. Any man who's fool enough to get himself into a mess like that isn't worth saving."

"They're not a very sociable bunch," he commented.

The girl came up to him and shook her head when she'd had a good look at his face. "You don't look so good. Better come inside, I live in a place at the back here, and let me doctor you up a bit."

Clint followed her down between the stalls toward the back. He found himself in a neat little room, shining clean. It looked more like a man's room, he thought at first. But then, she ran a man's business.

He watched her take down a bottle of liniment and tear off a strip of clean white rag. The liniment stung. "Does it hurt?" she asked concernedly.

"Not much," he lied. She was standing close to him, so close that he could feel the light press of her body against his.

Maybe, when he thought about it later, it was the fact she'd saved his life that made him feel like he did then. Maybe it was the excitement of the fight still racing through him. Or—maybe it was that there had been times in the last two years when he'd ached for a woman. He hadn't given women much thought, after his wife had gone. The memory of her was too much for that to happen.

There'd been other women, before he'd married, of course. The kind that catered to a man's lonesomeness. He felt that lonesomeness now, in a strange way. There was a recklessness about it, perhaps prompted by his brush with death.

He heard the bottle of liniment gurgling where it dropped when she put her arms around him. He felt the closeness of her against him now as he held her tight. Her lips were hungry and they bruised the cuts till he tasted blood mingled with the sweetness. He pulled her away and their eyes met in understanding.

"I'd better get over to the hotel," he said.

She nodded. He knew she was fighting the hunger of a woman who'd lost her man too long. "I'll take care of your animals."

Clint picked up his hat from the table and turned to the door. She stopped him with a question. "Don't you even want to know my name?"

He saw the hurt in her eyes, waited with embarrassment for her to go on. She told him. "Sadie McGowan. You can call me Sadie, if you like."

"Thanks, Sadie. I won't forget what you've done for me."

"Not even if I get curious?"

"About what?"

"About what caused all this."

"It's a long story, Sadie."

"You can make it short if you want to."

He looked at her. There'd be no harm in telling her. She'd saved his life and Cober might not like her for that. "Alright. Know a man named Fred Cober?"

She nodded. "That's what I can't understand. Those were his men. Why should they try to kill you?"

He weighed what she'd just said. It sounded to him like Cober's reputation was all right in her eyes. Well—she'd asked him.

"Cober killed my wife up in Wyomin' two years ago. I found out he was here. I came down to settle the score."

Sadie put a hand quickly to her throat. She opened her mouth as if to say something, then changed her mind. "I—I see," she said instead.

"Goodbye," he said. "And—thanks."

She didn't say anything, and as he picked up his war sack from the ground outside he thought it was strange she hadn't. He stopped in the middle of the street when the thought struck him. Maybe—well, as far as he knew, Cober was single. Clint had heard Cober had a way with women. Sadie was a widow.

The man behind the hotel desk looked up as Clint walked in. Canadian Palace, the sign outside had read. Clint didn't think it looked much like he thought a palace should. But it was clean. He dumped his war sack on the floor.

The man behind the desk was holding out his hand when Clint looked up. Clint took it warily, instantly on guard against anyone who displayed sudden friendship. But the grip was firm and sincere.

"Congratulations," the man said.

"For what?" Clint saw the man was older than he'd looked at first glance. Well over fifty, with hair almost white and shoulders that were bent.

"For standing up to Cober's men like that." The old eyes snapped with fierce pride for Clint.

"Not much else I could do," Clint said honestly. "As it was, I'd have been killed if Mrs. McGowan hadn't brought out her blunderbuss."

"Just the same," the old one nodded, "most men would've been shot in the back tryin' to run." He looked Clint up and down and added, "You got a mite beat up at that, young feller. Never mind, I suppose you want a room—well, here's the key to Number Eight. Top of the stairs at the back. Ain't nobody goin' to bother you up there. They have to come past the desk here first, and the only window's over the roof of the saloon next door. I'm here most of the time. Either me or my wife. Her name's Nancy—a good woman. Mine's Art. Art Dunlop, that is."

Any misgiving Clint had was gone. "Thanks, Art," he smiled. "I can use some shut-eye alright. How much do I owe?"

"Pay whenever you leave," Art said carelessly. "You're credit's good."

"What if I leave feet first?" Clint wasn't joking.

Art studied his face for a minute, then said slowly, "You ain't gonna leave feet first, young feller. I know why you're here. I was here last night when some of the boys brought Cal Langer in. The doctor was in the dinin' room havin' his supper. They had him look at Cal. Then while they was waitin' for the doc to finish with Cal I heard Ed Bartow a tellin' Stub Langer about you and your cow. I knew who you was as soon as I saw you drive that cow up in front of the livery across the street. And any man who's so dad-blamed eager to see Fred Cober get a cow he drove down

from Wyomin' has got a good reason. No, you ain't goin' out of noplac' feet first. You got too much guts."

"I hope you're right, old-timer." Clint picked up the key and started for the stairs. He felt suddenly weary, and the talk of a bed sounded good, though it was hardly mid-day. He ached in every muscle and bone from Langer's boots and fists.

Inside the room he waited only long enough to pull off his boots, lock the door and prop a chair under the knob. Then he dropped his hat and gun belt on a chair beside the bed and fell on top of it with his clothes on. Weariness came over him like a fog. He fought off sleep just long enough to pull his six-shooter from the holster and slide it under his pillow. Then he slept.

He was awakened by a pounding on his door. He sat up quickly, the soreness in him reminding him what had happened. Through the window he could see the pale light of the fading day.

"Who's there?" he called.

"It's me. Art. Open up."

Clint got up and opened the door, taking his gun with him. But he laid it aside when he saw it was the old man.

"How do you feel, youngster?"

Clint yawned and sat on the edge of the bed. "Like I'd been run over by a stampede," he grinned.

"You look it, too—clothes all tore and everythin'. Are you hungry?"

"Come to think of it, I could eat a buffalo."

Art chuckled. "Leave the buffalo meat to the railroad crews. Nancy's got some good mulligan stew for supper to-night. The dinin' room's open in a few minutes."

Clint stood up. "Sounds mighty good, old-timer. Reckon I got time to shave?"

"Figgered you'd like to, that's why I come up a little early. How'd a hot bath strike you?"

"Where am I?" Clint grinned. "New York City?"

"There's a bath house back of the kitchen. The cook-stove heats the water. There's a mirror there, too, so's you can shave."

Clint stood in the wooden tub and let the pitcher of hot water run down over his body. He felt the heat draw the sore stiffness from his muscles and it felt good. After he'd shaved and put on clean clothes he went downstairs again to eat.

There were half a dozen others at the table when he got there. They nodded briefly and he nodded back. As he ate hungrily he became aware that the conversation at the table had stopped with his coming. He also noticed that the others were looking at him surreptitiously as they ate in silence.

One by one the others finished ahead of him and left the table. He was sitting alone, relishing the sight of the thick cream he was pouring over the stewed wild plums, when he saw Art Dunlop coming toward him from the lobby.

"There's a woman waitin' to see you outside in the lobby, young feller," Art said uneasily.

Clint looked at him disbelievingly. Then his puzzled expression changed. "Probably Sadie McGowan come to see if I'm still in one piece." He stood up, and then added with a laugh, "Or else she figures I'm a poor risk and has come to collect my stable bill in advance."

Old Art shook his head. "It ain't Sadie, Clint."

Clint saw the look in the old man's eyes. "Then who in thunder is she? I don't know any women in Desperado City."

"Her name," the old man said slowly, "is Annette Cober."

Clint felt his knees go weak. This was something he hadn't counted on. Revenge was one thing. Killing a woman's husband was another.

He stammered when he spoke again. "I—I didn't know Fred Cober had a wife."

"She ain't his wife, Clint. She's his daughter."

CHAPTER FOUR

IN THE FEW SECONDS it took Clint to cross from the dining room into the hotel lobby, he tried to imagine what kind of daughter a man like Cober would have. She would have to be, he figured, either a mousy little thing, bullied into timidity by her brute of a father—or, she would be like Fred Cober himself, cold, unscrupulous and as hard as shoe iron. He wasn't prepared for what he found.

Annette Cober sat in one of the four battered leather chairs which graced the lobby of the Canadian Palace. She stood up when she saw Clint come through the door. Like Sadie McGowan, Clint noticed, the Cober girl wore range clothes. But she wore them in such a way as to lend an air of dignity to the humble denim. There was none of the Cober brashness about her. Clint minded that he had never seen a woman carry herself with such poised confidence. Her face, smooth brown from the Texas wind, was framed by hair Clint would have sworn was pure silk the color of gold. Her eyes were cool blue, and they met his without wavering. When she spoke her voice reminded him of honey dripping slowly in the summer sun.

"You're Clint Driskill, aren't you?"

"Yes, Ma'am. And you're . . ."

"Annette Cober. How do you do, Mister Driskill."

Clint noticed that her voice was not friendly, despite its warmth. But then, it wasn't unfriendly, either. Just matter-of-fact. He waited for her to talk first. She came straight to the point.

"Mister Driskill, I've come to ask you why you're in Desperado City."

Clint sized her up quickly. She couldn't know what Cober had done to him or she wouldn't ask. He was trying hard to

recall if he'd ever heard, up in Wyoming, about Fred Cober having a daughter. As far as he could remember, the man had passed himself off as unmarried. It might just be that Cober had left this girl here, then come back to her and tried to settle down to a life of pretended respectability for her sake. But it was hard to reconcile that with what he'd seen and heard since he'd come here.

"That's a mighty personal question, Miss Cober," he said dryly.

She flushed a little when he said that. "Perhaps it is, but I've heard that you've come here to stir up trouble for my father."

Clint didn't answer her.

"I've heard," she went on, "that you've already beaten up two of Daddy's men."

"Did it ever occur to you, Miss Cober, that they might have asked for it?" He tried to keep a civil tone, but there was an edge to his words.

Annette Cober tossed her head defiantly. "There are two sides to everything. I've heard that you've been brought here by the people who would like to see my father ruined. I'll admit that some things have happened which weren't exactly right, but my father isn't entirely to blame. He's been very patient with those people across the river."

"What people, Miss Cober?"

"Those—those nesters! You see, my Daddy was one of the first men to come here. What he got, he's worked hard for. Jealousy is a terrible thing, Mister Driskill. Those people over there are jealous of the way Fred Cober has built a cattle empire out of this barren land. When he tried to buy them out, because he needed the hay along the river for winter feed, they started stirring up all kinds of trouble. They beat up his men and started ugly rumors about my father's reputation. When they saw he needed the land, they asked ten times what it was worth. Of course he couldn't pay it, so they began to act like he is trying to drive them out. And now—now they've sent for you."

Clint tried to keep his astonishment from showing on his face. Either Cober thought he was a damn fool and had sent this girl here to talk him into leaving the country by

playing on his sympathies, or the girl actually thought she was telling the truth.

"Nobody sent for me, Miss Cober," Clint told her soberly.

"Then it's worse than I thought."

"What do you mean by that?"

"When I first saw you just now, I thought you looked like the kind of man who might have come here because you really believed the ugly rumors and wanted to help those people protect what was theirs. But since you came here on your own, I can see there's no use talking to you."

"I don't understand."

He noticed that her lips trembled just a little when she spoke again. "If you had been that kind of man, I thought I might be able to talk to you—to let you know the other side of the story. But since you're—well, to be quite frank, Mister Driskill, I know your kind. Desperado City is full of them. That's where it got its name. Men who will do anything for money. Even—even *kill*." She stopped for a moment to try to control the tremor in her voice. "I can only say this for you, whatever happens to you from here on out is your own fault. Good night, Mister Driskill!"

Clint didn't try to stop her. It was all too plain to him now that she believed what she said. Even if he had told her why he was here she probably wouldn't have believed him. It would be better if she found it out from somebody else.

When she was gone he turned slowly, trying to fathom the strange feeling deep inside him. It came to him, then, that he did not relish the thought of having to one day face Annette Cober with her father's blood on his hands. Not just because she was Fred Cober's daughter, but more because she was the kind of a girl that a man would want to have for his wife.

Clint walked over to the desk where Art Dunlop stood watching him. The old man shook his head. "I was hopin' that wouldn't happen," he said slowly.

Clint looked at him strangely. "Why do you say that?"

Art shrugged. "I shouldn't've said it, I guess. None of my dad blamed business, actually. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"Well, Clint, I'll tell you. For a long time this country's needed somebody who would stand up to Fred Cober. I thought you might be him. But . . ." and he waved his arm in the direction the girl had taken when she departed, ". . . when a man sees her, it makes it kind of hard to do."

"Maybe," Clint said uneasily. "And, then, maybe not." But he knew all too well that the old man spoke the truth.

"Funny thing about Cober," Art rambled on. "Up until he brought his daughter out here from the East, he was a man everybody looked up to. Something must've happened to him in that three years he was away that made a change in him. Annette's not the kind of a woman that'd make a man do the things he's done. Matter of fact, most folks feel that she's blind to the kind of a man Cober has turned out to be."

Clint was thinking. Something Art had said stirred some vague thought in the back of his mind. Yet, he couldn't seem to bring it into sharp focus. "You said something about Cober's being away three years. How long ago was that?"

Art fingered the stubble on his face and gazed thoughtfully at the floor. "Lemme see now. It was two years ago this winter he came back. That would make it . . ."

Two years! Clint thought. That would mean that Cober came straight back to the Panhandle after . . .

He asked Art, "Why would a man with a big outfit like he seems to have want to go away and leave it for three years?"

"That's a question that's been asked hereabouts for a long time, Clint."

"Who took care of his spread while he was away?"

"The Langers. Stub Langer, the one you tusseled with this mornin', has been Cober's foreman for as long as I can remember."

"I see," Clint said absently. But he didn't see. It just plain didn't make sense to him that a man would walk off and leave a big cattle business for three whole years. Nor could he understand why, with a setup like this here in the Panhandle, Cober would hire on as foreman of an outfit in Wyoming and spend his time trying to drive all the little outfits out of the Wind River country.

"Yessir," Art was saying, "something happened to Fred Cober in that three years that made a changed man out of him." He glanced at Clint. "Your comin' down here, like you did, is the first inkling most of us have had that there's something to it."

Clint looked at him for a long minute. He decided to tell Art Dunlop why he was here.

"Then," the old man said when Clint had finished, "I don't guess it makes much difference about Annette Cober. I was afraid at first you might've had a change of heart about standin' up to Cober after meetin' his daughter. But after what he's done . . ."

"That's just where you're wrong, Art," Clint said slowly. "It does make a difference. Just how much, I'm not sure yet. But I don't like to think of having to face that girl after I'd killed her daddy."

He didn't tell Art the rest of how he felt about Annette Cober. That was the part he wasn't quite sure of yet.

Clint was dressed and downstairs the next morning before Desperado City had begun to stir. Mrs. Dunlop, Art's wife, was just opening the door to the dining room.

"You're up awful early, Mister Driskill," she smiled at him.

"Thought I'd ride around for a look at the country. And you can stop calling me Mister—it makes me feel like I'm still a stranger. Why, I've been in town nearly a whole day now."

She laughed at that. Clint liked the woman. She was as fat as her husband was thin, and she didn't look half his age though she probably was. She had a ready laugh, and that was what Clint liked most about her. Laughter was a pretty scarce commodity around Desperado City he was beginning to find out.

After he'd breakfasted hungrily on the ham and eggs and buttermilk biscuits she put before him, Clint strolled across to Sadie McGowan's livery. Most of the stiffness had gone from him by now, but there were places on his face and head which would be sore for a week or more. He had

to smile again when he thought of Cober's hard-bitten gunmen backing away from the angry girl behind the hammers of the big shotgun.

Sadie was harnessing a pair of blacks to a rig when Clint strolled through the door. She looked up, then looked down again quickly when she saw who it was. It puzzled Clint, especially the redness of her face, until he remembered what had happened after she'd doctored his bruises.

"Good morning, Mrs. McGowan," he said cheerfully. "How're my animals?"

She looked up again, but this time the look on Clint's face told her he had forgotten anything had happened between them. She looked relieved. "Most people call me Sadie," she said good-naturedly, then looked startled, as though in fear he might interpret it as forwardness.

"Most people call me Clint," he smiled back, "so that makes us even."

"Your animals are alright, Clint, but that cow of yours mustn't have had a bite of grass all the way down from Wyoming."

Clint chuckled. "Did she eat you out of house and home?"

"So much so that I've got to drive across the river to see if I can't get Jake Martin to contract to cut and deliver a couple of tons of hay!"

Clint saw she was joshing him, but the mention of Jake Martin gave him an idea. "Would it be too much of an imposition to ask if I could ride along? I'd like to see a little of the country hereabouts." He didn't tell her that he wanted to ask Jake a few more questions.

Sadie's face colored again and Clint realized what she had read into his words. But it was too late to change it now. "Clint," she said hesitantly, "I'm sorry about what happened yesterday. It—it didn't mean what you might think." She made an embarrassed pause. Clint took over.

"I know it didn't, Sadie. But I won't deny that I liked it!" He said it deliberately, then she saw that he was teasing her and she laughed. "Alright," she said lightly. "If you're willing to risk riding with an amorous widow, it's your neck, cowboy!"

Clint helped her finish harnessing the blacks and led them to the street. While she was getting settled behind the reins he walked over to where his saddle hung on the wall and slipped the rifle from its boot.

"What's that for?" she asked, frowning lightly.

"Can't tell," he said carelessly as he swung up beside her, "when you might run into rattlesnakes in this country."

They forded the river and swung up the wagon-rut trail that led to Martin's and beyond. "I stopped at Jake Martin's on the way down here," Clint said conversationally as they jogged along.

Sadie eyed him curiously. "Was that where you tangled with Cal Langer?"

"And Ed Bartow," Clint grinned. "A nice pair, those two."

Sadie turned away. "The Double O boys get a little rough now and then," she said.

"Is that Cober's outfit?"

"Yes. His brand is two circles side by side, overlapping a little."

She said it in a conversational tone, but Clint noticed that she was uneasy about something. Then he remembered how she had acted when he had told her his purpose in coming to the Panhandle. Funny, he thought, she had run Cober's men off with her shotgun, yet she seemed to feel that Cober himself was alright. He dismissed the thought as Jake Martin's place came into sight through the trees.

Ellen Martin came to the door when she heard the buckboard rattle into the clearing. Clint waved as they pulled up, but it wasn't until he got down and walked over that she recognized him.

"Sadie McGowan and Mister Driskill!" she said with some surprise.

"Clint, not Mister!" Clint grinned. "Where's your man? Sadie wants to buy some hay and I came along for the ride and to talk to Jake."

"He's somewhere on the upslope, over toward the rim-rock. Went over there to build a pond to catch drainage

water from the slope. When the river's low the cattle won't walk out to water on account of quicksand."

She invited them to stop back and take their noon meal there, but Sadie said she had to get back to tend to her business. They both thanked her and then set out to find Jake.

When he clambered back into the buckboard Clint happened to notice the brand the black team wore. It hit him so hard that he nearly exclaimed out loud. It was the Double O. He wondered if Sadie had noticed him looking. He turned his head to look at her but she had turned in the seat and was waving at Ellen Martin.

There was probably nothing wrong with it, he guessed. Sadie could very easily have bought the team from the Double O. But then he thought of the surprised look on Ellen's face when she had seen the two of them together. Then he realized that there couldn't be any connection. If Cober owned Sadie McGowan's livery, like Clint was thinking, Jake Martin would be the last man in the world to sell her hay.

They found Jake, busy with a team of mules, scooping up earth and making a dam across a shallow depression. There was a surprised look on Jake's face when he saw them. But it only puzzled Clint more. It didn't solve anything, because likely Jake hadn't expected to see Clint back so soon, let alone in the company of the young widow.

They talked for a while about the dam Jake was building, then Sadie asked about the hay. Jake promised he'd have some cut and hauled over to her within a week. It was just before they were ready to leave when Jake said to Clint, "Clint, come over here a minute, there's something funny with this mule's foot. Maybe you can figure out what it is."

The way Jake had said it, Clint knew he was trying to get him alone for a minute. As he swung down from the seat he glanced up at Sadie. Her eyes were straight ahead, staring into the distance, and her pretty face wore a look of grim determination. Clint walked over to where Jake was standing beside the mule.

"See that foot?" Jake said, loud enough for Sadie to hear. Then he bent down beside Clint and whispered, "You know who she is, don't you, Clint?"

"No," Clint said, without changing expression or looking up.

"Well," Jake said slowly, "It's nothing against Sadie—she's a nice girl. But I just thought you ought to know—she's Fred Cober's woman."

CHAPTER FIVE

CLINT NODDED to show that he'd heard. Then he straightened up. "Nothing wrong with that foot a little liniment and rest won't cure, Jake," he said casually. "It's just a pulled muscle."

They walked back to the buckboard together and Clint settled down for the trip back to Desperado City.

They rode along in silence for a while. Finally Clint stole a look at Sadie's profile. The same look of grim determination was there. She turned and saw him watching her. "Jake told you—didn't he?" she asked quietly.

Clint only nodded. She looked away again. There was something else in her face now. Clint thought she might be mad at Jake for telling him. Instead, now, she seemed a little bewildered. Come to think of it, he had to admit he was, too.

"Surprised?" she asked, smiling, he thought, a little guiltily.

"What's between you and Fred Cober is no concern of mine," he told her soberly.

"But you're probably wondering how come Fred and I are friends. Is that it?"

"Not exactly. I've heard tell some of the nicest women fall for the rottenest men."

She looked at him sharply, then looked away again. "I'm not trying to defend myself, Clint. Sometimes I wonder about Fred myself. He's—he's changed a lot since he went away."

Clint looked down at the toes of his boots against the dashboard. There it was again—the change that had come over Cober.

"Sometimes—" she stopped, trying to keep the tremor out

of her voice. "Sometimes I've wanted to kill him myself!"

Clint was thinking how hard she was making it for him. The two of them—Annette Cober and Sadie. Then he thought about another woman. His wife. And he remembered Fred Cober, standing there in front of the Wind River saloon, pumping slug after slug through the thin sides of the buckboard. He could hear the sound of his wife's voice uttering a small cry of pain. His face grew hard again.

They exchanged few words on the remainder of the ride into town. When they pulled up at the livery Clint started to help her unharness the blacks, but Sadie wouldn't have it. "You go on," she told him. "You've got things to do."

He looked at her, reading the meaning in her words. "Sadie," he said slowly, "you're going to hate me. But I came here to settle a score with a man named Cober."

"I'll not try to stop you, Clint," she said levelly. Their eyes met and held. Then Clint nodded and turned toward the Canadian Palace.

Art Dunlop sat with his feet propped up on the arm of another chair, reading a month old Dallas paper. "Hi, young feller! You sure got off to an early start this mornin'."

"Wanted to take a look around the country. Just thought I'd get it out of my system."

"Mighty nice company you picked, anyway," the old man chuckled.

"That brings up a question, Art."

"What's that?"

"How come you didn't mention anything about Sadie McGowan being Cober's woman?"

"Because," Art said, getting up and leaning across the desk, "I didn't want to put you off her. I wanted to let nature take its course."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, who told you she was Cober's woman?"

"Jake Martin, why?"

"He don't know Sadie like I do. Jake was probably afraid Fred Cober was tryin' to get Sadie to take you in." Art looked around the lobby to see if anyone could hear. Then he

leaned closer to Clint. "What I got to say, Clint, is something maybe I hadn't ought to. But since it concerns you, I guess you got a right to know. Y'see, Fred Cober's wife died about a year before he left here. She died back East someplace. She'd always been a little sickly, I guess. That's why she didn't come out here with him in the first place. Wanted to wait until things got settled down a bit."

Art shifted his weight to the other elbow and cleared his throat. "Well, sir—after that happened, Fred started courtin' the Widow Sadie McGowan. Sadie come in here one night, happy as could be, and told me Fred had asked her to marry him. Then about a week later he up and left and didn't come back for three years. That was two years ago, when he come back, I mean. Ain't been no weddin' yet."

Clint leaned against the desk, gazing thoughtfully at the floor. Then he looked up at Art. "So, when you saw Sadie help me out of that mess with Cober's toughs yesterday, you figured that she might have turned sickly against Cober. Is that it?"

"Like I say, Clint. I thought I'd let nature take its course. Sadie never stood up for no man like she did for you. And against Cober's own men, too. So," he shrugged his shoulders, "I figured she might be of help to you. If I'd told you she'd been Cober's woman, you might have steered clear of her altogether."

Clint gave the old man a grateful nod. "Thanks, Art. Maybe you did me a favor at that." He turned to go when another question occurred to him. "Art, how long ago did Annette Cober come out here?"

"Not until about three months after Fred come back. She'd stayed on in Boston with some relatives while she finished up at one of them high-toned schools for ladies."

Clint nodded again and went up to his room. There was more to this business of killing Fred Cober than he'd ever thought there'd be. Tossing his hat on the chair, he sat on the edge of the bed and rolled a cigarette while he tried to think.

Of one thing he was certain—no matter how Sadie McGowan felt about Fred Cober now, and no matter what Annette Cober thought of her father, it didn't change what

had happened in Wyoming. Clint Driskill was not a killer. But there are times in any man's life when he must do a thing he dislikes in the name of justice.

Just how to go about it, now that he was here, was something else again. It would be sheer suicide to try to ride into the Double O after Cober. And it was highly unlikely that Cober would come into town as long as Clint was around. Some way, somehow, Clint would have to find a way to catch the man off guard. Then, there was the cow. He'd sworn to make a present of her to Fred Cober, and Clint Driskill was a man of his word.

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. He eased his gun from its holster and stood against the wall beside the door. "Who is it?" he asked.

"Mæl Turpin," said a voice from the hall. "Jake Martin sent me to see you, Driskill."

Clint remembered Martin had mentioned Turpin as being one of the small ranchers near him. But there'd be nothing to keep Cober from sending one of the Double O men up there with the same story.

With a sudden motion Clint pulled the door open, standing behind it. Through the crack he could see the surprised look of the man in the hall. Still he couldn't be sure. "Come in," he said civilly.

The man walked into the room, looking around for whoever had spoken to him. Clint kicked the door shut and revealed himself.

"Sorry to meet you like this, Turpin," he smiled, "but I don't know you and for all I know you might be from the Double O."

Turpin grinned. He was about Clint's age and the same general build. Only, where Clint's hair was sand colored, Turpin had an unruly red mop. "Now that's the last place I'd be from," he told Clint.

"What was Jake doing at his place this morning?" Clint tested him.

"Building a pond on the flats below the rimrock. Why?"

Clint put his gun away. "Just wanted to make sure who you were, that's all," he grinned. Then he stuck out his hand. "Glad to know you, Turpin!"

"Same here," the other replied. The man's grip was firm and there was something about him Clint took to immediately.

"How come Jake sent you to see me?"

"He wanted me to ask you something."

Clint said, "Have a seat, Turpin. I think better sitting down."

"The name's Mal," Turpin said as he sat down.

"Clint will do for me," Driskill told him. "What did Jake want to know?"

"Well, he came by our places last night—Wieborn's, Ash's, mine and a couple others—and told us about you being here. He said you had what it takes to put Cober back where he belongs."

"Maybe," Clint said doubtfully. "What's the proposition?"

"We're having a meeting tomorrow night at Jake's place. We'd planned it some time ago, to talk over banding us small ranchers together in case Cober tries to run us out. We'd like you to be there, Clint. Maybe you'd like to throw in with us."

"Jake told you, I guess, that my grudge against Cober is personal?"

Turpin nodded.

"I wouldn't want it thought," Clint told him seriously. "that I might be stirring up a nest of trouble just to get somebody to help me out."

Mal Turpin's face took a determined set. "Don't worry about that, Clint. Trouble's already started. Nile Miller—his place joins Jake's to the east—didn't take Cober's threats seriously. He laughed at the rest of us for being worried. This afternoon Nile came to Jake's place. Seems that a couple of Cober's men came riding up with the usual offer from Cober to buy Miller out. Nile just laughed at them, so when they rode off they shot one of his best saddle animals. They pretended it was an accident, but they hinted that more accidents might happen if Nile didn't sell."

Clint stood up. "Alright, Mal. I'll be at that meeting tomorrow night."

Turpin nodded his thanks. "One more question Jake

had," he said with a broad grin. "He noticed your face was a little bruised up this morning. You been picking on Cober's men again?"

Clint nodded, but the recollection of what had happened kept him from smiling. "Stub Langer and three others tried to kill me. And damn near succeeded!"

Mal Turpin looked at him with open admiration. "Any man who can hold his own with Stub Langer and three others . . ."

Clint broke in. "That's just it. It took all I had to whip Stub Langer."

"What about the others?"

Clint could smile about that. "Sadie drove them off with a shotgun."

Turpin's jaw dropped in astonishment. "Now I've heard everything!"

After Turpin had gone Clint sat alone in his room, thinking. Throwing in with the small ranchers might let him get a crack at Cober and at the same time he could be helping somebody else. But it left him feeling a new responsibility. From now on his job would be to try to stop Cober's land-grabbing without bloodshed. That meant he would have to figure some way to get to Cober on his own. He went down to the dining room for the noon meal feeling that he had only complicated his own problem. Yet he could hardly have refused their request for help.

He had just finished eating and had sauntered out into the lobby when Sadie McGowan came running in, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

"Clint! They've taken your cow!"

"Who took her?" Clint growled angrily.

"Cal and Stub Langer. I was in the back fixing something to eat when I heard her bawl. I went out to see what was wrong. By the time I got there she was gone. I looked down the street in time to see the Langers driving her away as fast as they could." Her eyes sought his apologetically. "Oh, Clint! I'm sorry . . ."

"You couldn't help it, Sadie," he told her. "But I can't waste time talking about it. I'm going to get her back."

It would take precious minutes to bridle and saddle the roan, but Clint knew they couldn't drive the cow so fast that he couldn't follow. He found himself wondering if this was something Cober had ordered, or whether the Langers had taken it upon themselves.

"Clint," Sadie begged as he wheeled the roan from the stable. "Don't go. They'll kill you!"

"They've both had a try separately and didn't do it. Now we'll see what they can do together!" Pulling his hat down hard he set the roan off down the street at a dead run.

He followed the road which led to the southwest, where Art had told him the Double O headquarters lay. The country here was sharply hilly, and as he topped each rise he looked for signs of dust in the hills ahead. There wasn't any to be seen. In the next instant he discovered why.

He saw the spurt of dust kick up ahead of the roan and then heard the whining ricochet of the slug. The next one snapped past his ear as he wheeled the roan sharply into a steep arroyo. They slid down the loose-graveled side and hit the floor with a heavy jolt. Clint pulled his saddle gun from the boot and edged back up the side of the arroyo.

Cautiously he poked his head over the edge, after having carefully removed his hat. The Langers had picked a good spot for the ambush. The hill ahead looked down on his own and the early afternoon sun was in their favor.

Too much in their favor. Another slug kicked sand in his eyes and he ducked back. He lay there for a minute, cursing his own stupidity.

CHAPTER SIX

SCRAMBLING AND SLIDING, Clint sought the shelter of the arroyo floor. Running as fast as he could in the deep sand, he covered some fifty yards before clambering back up the bank. Once more he peered over the edge.

The cow was tied to a juniper just beyond the brow of the hill. The Langers' horses were a little farther on. At least he could keep the two gunmen from their mounts. A flash of color caught his eye. That would be Cal. He remembered the loud shirt the man was wearing that night at Jake Martin's place. Clint figured Cal would pay dearly for his vanity of dress. He squinted down the sights, set a patch of red on top of the bead and squeezed the trigger.

The red patch of shirt moved out of sight just as the bullet ripped past where it had been. Clint heard it hit rock and go screaming off down the little valley. The Langers fired four rapid shots in return. Clint chuckled. They were still shooting at the place he'd just left. He eased up for another shot.

Something moved behind a juniper farther over. That must be Stub, he thought. He drew a bead at the base of the juniper. Then he lowered his rifle when he saw the girl ride along the open crest of the hill. It was Annette Cober! She was coming straight toward him!

He waited until she was between him and the Langers, then stood up. She was close enough now that they wouldn't dare shoot at him without risk of hitting her. He saw Stub and Cal watching the girl on the buckskin.

The girl's face was angry. "I ought to let them shoot you!" she snapped at Clint as she pulled up. "But for the fact that I abhor bloodshed, I think I would. Can you possibly

give any explanation for your cowardly sneaking through the dirt like a snake, shooting at people?"

"Yes, ma'am," Clint said evenly. "I was trying to recover my property they'd stolen. They shot first, so I took it upon myself to shoot back. Or don't you believe in a man defending himself?"

She ignored his question. "What stolen property?" she demanded in astonishment.

Clint pointed to the cow. "My poor little old domino cow," he said reprovingly. "Aren't you ashamed to have such men working for you?"

She looked at him for a minute. "Get your horse and come with me. I don't believe you."

Clint turned away in time to hide a smile and led his roan out of the arroyo. He mounted and rode with the Cober girl to where the Langers were waiting. They looked a little sheepish when she demanded angrily, "Whose cow is that?"

Clint grinned down at Stub Langer who frowned and shifted his feet uncomfortably. "His'n," Stub said with a quick nod at Clint.

"Then, what are you doing with her?"

"Gosh, Miss Cober," Cal pleaded. "It was only a joke. 'We was just havin' ourselves a little fun!'"

"You won't think it's so funny when I tell father," she snapped. "There are enough people trying to give him a bad name without you two helping out with your foolish pranks."

Clint thought he saw the faintest trace of a smile cross Stub Langer's face. But the man said soberly, "Yes, ma'am. It won't happen no more."

Clint leaned forward on his saddle horn. "It wouldn't be, would it boys," he asked, "that you took this way of getting back at me for the beating you took?"

He saw the Langers stiffen, anger flashing in their eyes. Both men's faces still bore signs of the licking they'd taken. "Besides," he went on, "I don't consider it much of a joke to have people shooting at me from ambush."

"That's a damn lie!" Stub roared. "Miss Cober, we was just havin' a little joke with this man's cow and he got mad

and started shootin' at us. We had to hole up and try to defend ourselves. We was just trvin' to figure some way to tell him it wasn't nothin' but a joke when you rode up."

Clint looked at Annette Cober, then back at Stub and Cal. "Why don't you tell her," he said evenly, "the truth about me and that cow?"

He saw the Langers tighten their grip on the rifles they held. Something occurred to Clint in that instant. It was a long chance that he was right. But something told him to play the hunch. Something more than just the fact that the Langers were anxious for her not to know the truth about the cow.

"What are you driving at, Mister Driskill?" Annette asked him.

Clint looked at Stub. "Go ahead, Stub. Tell her!"

Stub spat at him, "Go to hell!" Then he turned to Annette. "Don't pay no mind to him, Miss Cober. He's a professional gunman these nesters have hired into here to cause trouble for your daddy."

But Clint had lost all immediate interest in the Langers and their argument. The urge was strong to get back to Desperado City and ask a few questions that concerned the hunch he'd had.

"If you'll excuse me, Miss Cober, I think I'll take my cow and head back to town. And if these gentlemen won't tell you why I bothered to drive one lone cow all the way from Wyomin', you might ask your daddy!"

He could tell from the look on Annette Cober's face that the seed had been well sown. With a disdain he didn't feel, he turned his back on the Langers and rode toward where the cow stood tied to the juniper. The skin on his back tingled expectantly. Whether the bullet would come or not depended, in part at least, on how right his hunch was.

When he rode back by, driving the cow ahead of him, the Langers stood glowering at him. He tipped his hat and said "good day" to the girl, ignoring the other two. He felt he had proved something. The Cobers wouldn't risk shooting him in front of Annette Cober. That meant there had to be a reason. A good reason.

Clint noticed the look of relief when Sadie McGowan saw him dismount at the stable door. "You're back, Clint! What happened? Did you . . . ?"

He shook his head. "I tried. They ambushed me and just when I got to where I could draw a good bead on them the Cober girl came along and spoiled it all."

"Oh, then you've met her?"

Clint thought he could detect the faintest tinge of jealousy. He recalled what Art told him about the way Sadie had stood up for him. He unsaddled without answering.

"She's—she's very pretty, isn't she?" Sadie probed.

"Hadn't paid too much attention," Clint said casually. "Too busy watching the Langers." He didn't bother to tell her he'd met Annette once before.

Sadie sounded relieved. "I'm glad nobody got hurt."

She took Clint's saddle and hung it on a wall peg. Clint led the roan to a stall beside the cow. Then he went up to Sadie.

"You said something this morning, on the way back from Jake Martin's. Something about Fred Cober having changed in the three years he was away."

Sadie looked at him quickly, then looked away again and busied herself untangling a bridle. "Three years is bound to change a man a little, I guess." She's afraid, Clint thought, as her eyes met his.

"How much of a change, Sadie?"

"Oh, I don't know, Clint," she said irritably. "Things happen to a man when he's away, that's all."

"Like maybe changing into somebody else?"

She jumped as though he had slapped her. "What do you mean?" she asked. It was almost a whisper.

"Maybe that Fred Cober isn't Fred Cober!"

She looked away, fumbling with the bridle again. "That's a silly thing to say." She tried to laugh lightly but it didn't ring true.

Clint took her arm gently and turned her so that she had to face him. "There's one person in this country who would know whether a man was himself, or just somebody who looked a lot like him."

"Who?"

"The woman who was in love with him."

"Clint, I don't know what you're driving at. I just said . . ."

"You said Fred Cober had changed. I think he did too, Sadie. The man I knew in Wyomin' is not the kind of a man a woman like you could love."

"You said yourself that sometimes the nicest women fall for the rottenest men!"

"Yes, and you looked like you wanted to kill me when I said it."

"Clint, let's talk about something else. You're imagining things just because I happened to say I thought three years away had changed Fred. Now let's forget it!"

"Like you forgot to marry Fred when he came back?"

She drew a sharp breath when he said that. "Who told you that?"

Clint ignored the question. "I'm not prying into your private life, Sadie. But it just doesn't add up that a man everybody respected before could change so much. I'm convinced, now, that something has happened to the real Fred Cober. If the truth were known, it might clear up a lot of things. Now—you can help me, maybe, by telling me what you know. It might give me some idea of a way to let Cober, or the man who calls himself Cober, trip himself up."

She took his hand and squeezed it hard. He could feel her hand trembling in his. "Oh, Clint!" she whispered. "I'm so afraid!" She glanced around to see if anyone was watching them. "Come around to the back with me, back where I live. I can't tell you about it here, somebody might come in."

Clint followed her inside the door to her quarters. She motioned him to a chair and he sat rolling a cigarette while he waited for her to talk.

At last she stopped pacing up and down and stood in front of him. "You're right, Clint. Dead right. I don't know who this man is, any more than you do. I only know he's not Fred Cober."

Clint held a match to his smoke. "When did you find it out first?"

"About a month after he came here. He looks like Fred, an awful lot. Enough to fool most people. That, plus the fact that he was supposed to have been away three years, was enough to fool me, too, for a while. At first, I just thought that the three years away might have changed him."

"Did he want to go ahead with the wedding?"

Sadie nodded. "But for some reason—I don't know, something about him, I guess—I held off for a while. Then, I began to notice things. I'd mention things that had happened in the past and he'd get them all mixed up when he tried to talk about them. I thought maybe he'd just forgotten. Then I began to notice his looks. He looked different, somehow. In a way that time alone couldn't change. And he began to act ambitious. Ambitious in the wrong way."

"You mean like wanting to run the little people out of the valley?"

"Yes. Fred had always been a champion of the small ranchers. That was how he got his own start, more or less. Then when I began to think back, I knew something had happened. I knew this man wasn't Fred."

"What did you do then?"

"I made the mistake of telling him one night. He wanted me to marry him right away, and he got nasty when I said no. Then I told him. I should have kept still, I guess, and told somebody else."

She sat beside Clint suddenly, and put a hand on his arm. "Oh, Clint! You don't know how I've lived since then." There were tears in her eyes and her lips trembled when she spoke. "He threatened to kill me if I breathed a word. It's been hell, Clint. Sheer hell!"

Clint patted her arm understandingly. "You're a brave girl, Sadie."

"No, I'm not," she said angrily, wiping her tears on her shirtsleeve. "If I were I'd have told somebody what had happened. But then, he'd probably have killed me like he said he would."

"Did he ever tell you who he is?"

Sadie shook her head. "Never. And by that time I was too afraid to ask any more questions."

"Or what happened to the real Fred Cober?"

"I've often wondered that myself, Clint. I asked what he'd done with Fred, but he'd only laugh at me. He said if I'd ever marry him he'd tell me."

"He still wants you to marry him, huh?"

Sadie nodded. "Like a cat wants a mouse to play with."

Clint walked over to the small wood range and threw his cigarette in the ash pit. Then he thought of something else. "What about the riders for the Double O? Are they in on it?"

"The Langers and Ed Bartow probably are. Stub Langer was Fred's foreman. I never did like him, but he was a good hand and knew how to handle men so Fred kept him on. None of the original hands are left. Only the Langers and Bartow."

"I see," Clint said reflectively. He pulled a match out of his pocket and started to chew on it.

"There—there's one other thing," Sadie said hesitantly.

Clint looked up. "What's that?"

"Fred Cober's safe. The one he used to keep at the ranch."

She got up and crossed the room to a closet. Opening the door she pulled aside an old quilt. A small, but heavy, iron safe stood on the floor. The lettering on it read, Fred Cober, Double O.

Clint squatted down to look at it. "What's in it?" he asked.

"I don't know, Clint. But I wish I'd never seen the thing!"

"How'd you get hold of it?"

"Cal and Stub Langer and Ed Bartow came by soon after Fred was supposed to have gone away. They brought this with them. They said that if anything ever happened to them I was to break it open."

"It's pretty heavy," Clint mused. "But I think I could bust it open."

Sadie gave a frightened gasp. "Oh, no, Clint! One of them comes by every week or so to check on it. They'd know if you even touched it."

"Does the present Fred Cober know it's here?"

She shook her head. "They said they'd saved some money they didn't want anybody to know about. Not even Fred. That was before I knew something had happened to Fred."

Since then I've been afraid to say anything to anybody about the safe, either."

"I couldn't break that safe open without leaving marks on it. But I'll wager my last pair of boots that if we could get it open we'd find out what happened to Fred Cober!"

"You mean—they did this to protect themselves from each other?"

"Probably. They're afraid one of them might get mad at the others and tell somebody what's going on out at the Double O. This will keep them from it. They've probably put it all down on paper so that no one of them dares step out of line without tripping himself up."

"Then why don't they want Fred Cober to know about it?"

Clint shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, for sure, Sadie. Maybe the Langers and Bartow have something on the man who calls himself Cober. Or maybe he knows something about them and this is their way of keeping him from double-crossing them."

Clint picked up his hat and started for the door. Sadie came up to him, a pleading look in her eyes. "Clint, promise me you won't breathe a word of this to anybody."

"Not until the right time comes, anyway."

He put on his hat and was reaching for the doorknob when he thought of something else. "Tell me, Sadie—if you were so all-fired afraid of Cober and the rest, how come you took my side with your shotgun yesterday?"

"Because," she said slowly, "I knew that if Cober's men were after you, you must have had a good reason to come all this way. And I thought if you'd come here to get Fred Cober it—it would settle all of my problems. I was being pretty selfish, wasn't I?"

"Yes, but I don't blame you. But won't they get back at you for it?"

"I don't think so," she told him. "I've had to run them off before when they've come to town and got drunk and made a nuisance of themselves."

"Well, I still owe you my life."

"You don't owe me anything, Clint. You don't know how good it's made me feel—being able to trust you like this."

Now—well, I feel at peace with myself for the first time since it all started. I feel like it's all over."

Clint smiled grimly. "Maybe—like the old saying goes—it's all over, except the shooting."

His mind was busy with the thoughts of what Sadie had told him as he left the livery and started across the street to the hotel. So busy that he almost didn't see the man who came out the front door. It was Ed Bartow. Clint stopped where he was on the board walk, his hand brushing the butt of his .45. He watched Bartow mount his horse and pound down the street in the direction of the trail to the Double O. The man didn't see him, or, if he did, he gave no notice.

Clint approached the door of the Canadian Palace with certain misgivings. He was certain that whatever Bartow was up to, it had something to do with Clint Driskill. First, he was thinking, the Langers try to steal my cow, and now I get a sociable call from Ed Bartow. Business, he told himself, was picking up.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CLINT FOUND the lobby empty when he walked in. He stuck his head into the dining room and saw Art Dunlop coming from the kitchen.

"What was Ed Bartow doing here?" Clint asked.

"Bartow? I wouldn't know what he'd be doin' here. I've been back helpin' Nancy pluck chickens. He must've come in awful quiet because I was keepin' an ear open in case anybody came in."

"I'd better check my room," Clint said, heading for the stairs. "No telling what he might have been up to."

The door was locked, but Clint knew Bartow could have picked up the key at the desk and put it back when he left. The room was empty. As far as Clint could tell, nothing had been disturbed.

After supper Clint sat in the lobby, smoking and talking to Art.

"How come," Art wanted to know, "you left here in such an all-fired hurry this noon?"

Clint told him about the Langers making off with his cow. When he related how Annette Cober had stopped the gunfight Art shook his head. "Beats me, Clint. I don't see how Cober keeps that girl so much in the dark about what goes on around here. It's a shame that a nice woman like her has to have an old man like Cober."

Clint silently agreed. "Art, would you say Cober changed much in the three years he was away?"

"Never seen a man change so much in my life. Five years ago Fred Cober was as square a man as you'd ever want to know. When he come back here he'd turned into the worst kind of bully."

Clint made his next question sound casual. "I mean, had his looks changed much?"

"Looks? Well—he looked a mite older. But meanness can do that to a man, I guess. To tell the truth, I ain't seen him but one or two times since he come back."

"Does he show himself much these days?"

Art shook his head. "He's took to staying pretty much on his own range. A man like him makes too many enemies to get too far from home."

Clint nodded and stood up. Cober, he was thinking, played it pretty smart. "I think I'll hit the hay, Art," he yawned, standing up to stretch. "Need a lot of sleep if I'm going to figure some way to draw Cober out into the open."

Back in his room Clint asked himself how Annette Cober would take it when she found out what had happened? It would probably be pretty hard on her. Clint held little hope that the real Fred Cober had been permitted to live.

He had no idea what had awakened him. Then he became conscious of a light but steady pressure on his chest. His first impulse was to jump up, grabbing the gun from under his pillow. A cloud moved away from the face of the moon and he was glad he hadn't. Moonlight glinted from the steel-like scales of the thing coiled on his chest. An ugly triangular head lifted itself inquisitively.

Bartow! Now Clint knew what the man had been doing at the hotel. He suppressed a shiver when he thought what might have happened had his foot pushed the reptile aside as he'd slid into bed. The warmth of his body after he'd fallen asleep had brought the rattler crawling from under the spread to the comfortable rhythm of Clint's chest.

He tried to keep his breathing regular, tried to keep down the pounding of his heart. Cold beads of sweat broke out on his face. A trickle of sweat ran down the end of his nose and the desire to scratch it was almost unbearable. How long can a man lie perfectly still? Clint didn't know. From the position of the moon he judged it was hours yet till dawn. No one came around to make the beds. Each guest made his own. Art would not notice his absence. He would think

Clint had arisen early and ridden off someplace. The sweat on his brow grew more profuse. He might, conceivably, lie there for days.

Clint kept his breathing measured, shallow. The angular head swayed slightly from side to side. The forked tongue flicked out, once or twice, purple in the moonlight. The head lowered itself gradually inside the coils. The annoyed whirring subsided.

Could he sling back the sheet, and the snake with it, and leap from the bed? Risky. The first move of his arm would bring swift retaliation from gleaming fangs. Clint wondered if there were a doctor in Desperado City. Yes, Art had mentioned one. But even doctors agreed the only way to survive a rattler's bite was not to get bit.

The chair! The chair he had propped against the door under the knob! Even if someone came by to look for him—Mal Turpin, maybe, if Clint didn't show up at Jake Martin's for the meeting. No one could get in without breaking down the door. The noise would anger the snake.

Sweat coursed down his ribs in a steady stream now.

He felt something resting lightly in his right hand. Feverishly, without moving his fingers, he tried to think what it might be. If only he could turn his head to look.

Then he remembered. The match he had been chewing when he fell asleep. The one he had sharpened for a toothpick while he talked to Art after supper. It gave him an idea.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he raised his thumb. So slowly that it was almost no movement at all. An awful thought struck him. His hand was wet with sweat. You can't scratch a wet match with your thumbnail and make it light. Dammit it had to light! The first time, it had to light. Snakes were afraid of fire, that much he was sure of.

His thumbnail rested against the match head. Then he tried to remember something else. Suppose he had used the match already? Suppose he had lit a cigarette with it after he'd finished picking his teeth? He did that sometimes. He tried to remember. He couldn't be sure.

He tensed his thumb ever so slightly. The angry whirring sound filled the room. He froze his muscles as the ugly head rose out of the coils once more, swaying gently back and

forth. The unsightly forked tongue flickered in and out, in and out. He flicked his thumb.

The match flared. Part of it stuck under his nail and he remembered not to jerk it away.

The whirring sound quickened. It grew into an angry rattle that filled the room like a steady chant of death. The swaying head steadied and Clint could feel the tensing of the heavy coils. Against his thigh he could feel the heat of the match. There was a smell of burning cloth as the sheet began to burn.

The ugly head with the beady eyes no longer stirred. Clint knew the rattler was tensed to strike. He felt the searing heat of the flames against his leg. He tried not to grit his teeth as the fire spread in a widening circle. There was a smell of burning hair and flesh as the fire reached his groin. Tears stood in his eyes. He gritted his teeth now, hopeful that the fire would hold the snake's attention.

Stay there, Clint! Let it burn your damn arm off. Let it burn your belly raw, but damn you don't move!

The muscles of his right leg began to quiver involuntarily. He tried to stop it, but he had no control. The room was bright now with the light of the fire. By lowering his eyes he could see the glistening reflections from the deadly coils.

The snake began to move.

Slowly, reluctant to give ground, the rattler started to unwind itself. Move fast, damn you! His right arm and right side was a seared stinking mess. The snake took its time, retreating slowly before the creeping flames. Clint felt the movement of the underscales as the long body propelled itself across his ribs. He felt the weight leave his chest. He waited.

There was a faint feeling of movement as the snake crossed to the edge of the bed. Clint bit his lip until he tasted the blood. The fire was an agony now.

He heard the thud as the snake dropped to the floor. Up he came, over the opposite side of the bed, scattering a shower of burning rag across the room. The gun! He grabbed it from under the pillow, unmindful now of the pain.

His violent exit from the bed had almost put out the fire. There was only the faint moonlight now. Holding his gun in his left hand he ran the other through the pockets of his pants on the chair and found another match. The lamp stood on the dresser by the opposite wall. Cautiously he moved across the floor, eyes straining into the near darkness. He knew rattlers didn't always give warning before they struck. Keeping his eyes on the floor, he felt across the top of the dresser for the lamp.

At first he thought the dark splotch on the floor was his hat, till he remembered he'd hung his hat on the bedpost. Another step and he'd have thrust his foot into the thick coils. He took aim as well as he could in the faint light and pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot boomed hollowly in the quiet room. The splotch on the floor exploded into a threshing, writhing thing. Clint jumped back. The movement slowed, gradually. Then the snake lay still. He struck the match and held it above his head. It had been a lucky shot, penetrating the coiled body twice, nearly severing the head below the neck. Clint noticed that his hand trembled when he held the match to the lamp wick.

The dank smell of burning straw assailed his nostrils. A smoldering spark had burned down into the mattress. He grabbed the pitcher of water from the dresser and soaked the bed thoroughly. Running footsteps sounded in the hall and there came a pounding at his door.

"Clint! You alright?"

"Yes, I'm alright."

"What in tarnation's goin' on, Clint? I thought I heard a shot!"

Clint pulled the chair from under the knob and unlocked the door. Art came in, carrying a sawed-off shotgun. "Lordy, Clint! There's been a fire here!" Then his eyes found the mangled snake on the floor. "A rattler! How'd it get up here on the second story?"

"Ed Bartow. Now I know why he was in such a hurry to get out of town!"

"Well I'll be—say, son, looks like you got burned. How'd that happen, anyway?"

Clint told him. Art winced, his imagination filling in the details Clint modestly avoided. "Better let me get some lard for those burns."

"It's not as bad as it looks," Clint told him. "But I could use something. I feel mighty lucky that a few blisters is all I've got to worry about!"

Several of the more curious had come out into the hall to see what all the fuss was about. "Nothin' to be excited about folks," the proprietor told them placatingly.

"I coulda swore a shot woke me up," a man said sleepily.

"Must have been the wind slammin' a door shut someplace," Art mumbled as he pushed past them.

Clint was surprised to find he could walk the following morning, although with difficulty. The burns weren't as bad as he had anticipated.

He was glad that the meeting of the small ranchers at Jake Martin's place wouldn't be until nightfall. For one thing, it would give him a little time to recuperate. For another, it gave him a chance to think over what he'd found out about the strange doings at the Double O.

The more he thought of it, the more certain he was that the "disappearance" of Fred Cober was a cleverly planned scheme that had taken years to execute.

He thought of asking Sadie's permission to tell about the safe at the meeting tonight. But he rejected the idea. Cober had proved himself to be clever. There might be some small ranchers who were so thoroughly afraid of Cober that they might try to buy into his favor by trading information. Besides, outside of what Sadie had told him about Fred Cober's disappearance, he had nothing but conjecture to go by.

So far as the ranchers were concerned, their only complaint against Cober's outfit was that he was trying to pressure them out of their land. It would be better to work along with them on that basis for a while, until something turned up that would give him a better opportunity to act.

Clint had just finished filling himself with some of Nancy Dunlop's noon meal of stewed chicken and dumplings and had settled himself in a chair on the shaded hotel porch when he noticed the rider turn into the street at the far end

of town. He paused in the middle of rolling a smoke to watch. It wasn't the fact that the rider was pushing the buckskin at a dead run that made him stop to look, but rather it was that he had caught the glint of sunlight on the honey-yellow hair streaming out behind. The rider was Annette Cober.

Clint smiled grimly as he wet the paper with his tongue and twirled it between his fingers. From the way the girl was riding, he figured she must be plenty mad.

Sure enough, she pulled up short in front of the Canadian Palace and dismounted. Clint felt a little sorry for her.

He stood up politely as she came up the steps and headed straight for him. "Afternoon, Miss Cober," he said affably, taking off his hat. Her face, instead of being angry like he had expected, wore a worried look.

"Mister Driskill," she began haltingly. "I—I hardly know how to say this, but I . . ."

"You don't quite trust me, do you Miss Cober?" he asked gently. He felt a strange compassion for this unhappy girl, knowing what he did about her father. He wanted to take her into his confidence, to comfort her, to protect her.

She colored slightly at the implication of his words. He waited for her to find her own words.

"I—I don't know," she told him frankly. "I know you've come to town to stir up trouble for my father, and yet . . ."

"Yes, Miss Cober?"

She glanced hurriedly around to see if anyone was listening, then lowered her voice almost to a whisper. "Could—could I talk to you? Somewhere more private than this, I mean." She looked back down the street in the direction she had come as though she might be expecting someone.

"We can go sit in a corner of the dining room," he suggested. "The noon meal's over, there'll be nobody around."

Clint followed her as she led the way into the hotel, her fine head held high, her lovely features proudly defiant. They seated themselves at a corner table near the street window where anyone coming into the dining room would not overhear what they might say. Clint laid his hat on a chair beside him and waited for her to begin.

"I suppose you think it's strange—my coming here like

this after what has happened?" He could tell that she was making a plea of some sort, hoping that he would give her an opening for what she wanted to say. He gave it to her.

"Nothing that would happen concerning the goings on at the Double O would surprise me very much—now," he said, his tone intimating that she was free to speak.

"I did believe, at first," she went on hopefully, "that you were a hired gunman, but when the Langers acted so frightened and angry when you told me to ask them or my—" she hesitated, as though uncertain she should use the next word, "or my father about your cow, I became a little uneasy."

"Why, Miss Cober?"

"Well, for one thing," Annette went on, "I've never known the Langers to be the kind to play jokes. So I knew they must have some other reason for wanting the cow."

"Did you find out what it was?" he asked gently.

"Not—not exactly. But I found out something else that has worried me a little. I know it may sound strange, Mr. Driskill, but you're the only one who might be able to tell me. I—I'm trusting in you, because I have to." She looked at him as though to say she wouldn't blame him if he thought her a complete fool for trusting him like she was.

He nodded again to show that he understood.

"I decided to ask my—my father, about that cow, like you'd said. I was waiting outside his office when I heard Stub Langer already in there talking to him. I should have waited, I guess, but I was angry at Stub and wanted to ask the question in front of him so he'd have no chance to back down. It didn't dawn on me till later, but—" her face took on a different look all of a sudden, Clint noticed. It was more of a frightened look, he thought. Then he saw that she was looking over his shoulder, through the window that faced the street. Her lips moved—but no words came.

Clint turned slowly—too slowly.

Not three feet behind him a gun barrel was thrust through the open window. Behind it was Ed Bartow. Clint's hand dropped automatically to the butt of his .45.

"Hold it, Driskill!" Bartow snarled. "Miss Cober," he went on, as though he were disciplining a child, "your daddy wants you to come home."

She shot Clint a helpless glance. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Better do as he says, Miss Cober." He gave her a quick wink, hoping she would understand that it meant he would come after her. Apparently she did. She rose slowly, started for the dining-room door.

"This way," Bartow snapped. "Through the window!"

The Double O gunman turned to look quickly up and down the street as Annette stepped over the low sill. Clint knew what was coming next and threw himself against the wall just as Bartow's gun roared out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SHOT splintered through the back of the chair where Clint had been sitting seconds before. He had his own gun in his hand now, dropping on all fours as he drew. Despite the pain in his blistered leg he scrambled for the next window. Bartow would be watching the one he had seen Clint dodge behind. By the time Clint reached the other window, Annette was in the saddle. Bartow, on his own mount, was keeping her between himself and the hotel as a shield.

Clint swore aloud at his own helplessness. He could hear Bartow's low and angry commands and the girl's pleading protests. People were appearing in doorways up and down across the street, lessening Clint's chance for a clear shot at Bartow. Damn their curiosity! Clint thought.

He turned and ran out of the dining room and through the lobby even as the fast pounding of hoofs came to his ears. Racing down the front steps he was just in time to see Bartow and the girl turn behind a row of buildings out of sight. He slid his gun back in its holster and ran across to Sadie McGowan's livery.

To his surprise, Sadie was leading the saddled roan out the front door when he came running up. He swung up with a shouted, "Thanks, Sadie!" and let the roan have his head. Bartow would have to cut back to the trail at the edge of town, that would give him a little gain.

Clint topped a rise where the hills began outside of town, holding the roan to a dead run. There, just going over the brow of the hill ahead, were Bartow and the girl. He slipped the Winchester from its boot and checked the load. Maybe, just maybe, he might see them separate just long enough for a quick shot.

There was no doubt in his mind now that Annette had

heard enough of Stub Langer's conversation with Cober to make her suspicious. That they had sent Bartow to bring her back was proof enough of that. At least she had heard enough for Cober not to want her to be where she could talk to anyone, particularly, a man named Driskill.

Lordy, but I wish Bartow'd been a few minutes later! he groaned. Maybe then he'd have found out something. Right now he had to concern himself with stopping Bartow before they reached the Double O. No telling what they might do to the girl, now that she knew something. Maybe they might even try to kill her!

At the top of the next rise Clint wondered about something. Bartow had continued on, up over the next hill, when it might have been easier to go around and follow the shallow valley. Clint wondered more and more as he remembered Art's description of the trail to the Double O. Bartow would have cut off three or four miles by taking the valley. Then it hit him.

The hill ahead! The junipers and the rock slab! Yes, and there, on the left, was the arroyo. Now he saw why. He had wondered all along why they had sent Bartow in alone. Now he knew. They were leading Clint into another ambush.

He swung the roan in a cloud of dust and gravel, down the arroyo, down to where it bled into the little valley. Then he looked back, up the side of the hill he had bypassed. Goose pimples walked up and down his back as he saw the riders pouring out of hiding and running toward their horses. Another half minute and he'd have been a gone goose.

There were six of them altogether. He watched them swing over the hill cut of sight in the direction Bartow had taken. It would have taken them too long, he guessed, to come the way he had. They'd have had to double back too far. Now it was a race to see if they could catch Bartow and and warn him before Clint cut him off.

Clint stopped the roan where the valley broadened out. Below him he could see the sprawling outbuildings and main house of what must be the Double O headquarters, three miles or so away. He dismounted and led the roan

up a little slope to where rimrock slabs pointed upwards, giving fair cover. Then he sat down to watch the back trail.

He hadn't long to wait. Two riders came over the crest of the rise a quarter of a mile away. Bartow and the girl were going more slowly now, though they still held above a lope. Clint slipped the rifle from its boot and squatted behind a rock slab. Then he saw the other six riders, half a mile behind Bartow. They were firing shots in the air and shouting in an effort to warn Bartow of the danger ahead. The man must have thought they were signalling their victory over Clint, for he turned in the saddle and gave a jubilant wave.

A grim smile crossed Clint's face and he pulled back the hammer of the Winchester.

He blamed the fact that he fired too soon on the rapidity with which the riders were closing the gap on Bartow. At any rate, he missed. As the shot reverberated up and down the valley he heard Bartow shout at Annette to follow as he swung away. The maneuver gave Clint the chance he wanted. Annette didn't follow immediately, and that left Bartow exposed. Clint thought of the snake when he lined his sights on the man and pulled the trigger. Bartow fell heavily from the saddle and lay still.

Clint jumped up, waving his arms and shouting to Annette. He saw her hesitate for a minute, then spur the buckskin toward him. He swung aboard the roan and galloped out to meet her, riding at an angle away from the pursuing riders.

Having failed to bring the girl back where she would not be able to tell what she knew, the trailing riders determined that she would not escape with her life to tell now. Little geysers of dust began jumping up all around as Clint wheeled and shouted, "Ride for the river! It's our only chance!"

Whatever distrust she might have felt for Clint was dispelled by the murderous actions of the Double O men, and Annette dropped her buckskin beside Clint's roan as he raced for the hills to the north. Clint dropped back a pace, urging her on with a shout. Turning in the saddle he fired at the leading Double O rider. The man somersaulted

through the air, rolled over twice and sprawled grotesquely in the bunch grass.

A volley of shots followed Clint but he was unaware, for they all fell short as he raced to catch Annette. He was afraid, however, that their lead on the pursuing five would be a precious narrow margin when he and the girl slowed to ford the river. For all he knew there might not be a ford. He remembered what Jake Martin's wife had said about quicksand and muttered a prayer of a sort.

Annette was already swimming the buckskin when he urged the roan into the water. Glancing back he saw the five riders top the last ridge and come pounding down the slope toward the Canadian. Clint fired twice and missed, then turned his attention to swimming his horse as bullets showered water around him.

Suddenly the spurts of water subsided and Clint swung around for a look. The Double O men had turned at the water's edge and were riding hard for solid ground. Clint wondered if there might be quicksand ahead, that they discouraged so easily. He ran his eyes across the water toward the approaching shore. Annette was already climbing the buckskin out of the river. Then Clint saw the man step out from behind the cottonwood tree. He recognized Mal Turpin immediately from the mop of red hair. The redhead was balancing a long-barreled forty-five seventy in the crook of his arm and was grinning from ear to ear. Now Clint could understand the Double O men's sudden decision to ride elsewhere.

"Thanks, Mal," he said with feeling as he drew the heaving roan to a halt. "This," he said to Annette, indicating the redhead, "is Mal Turpin. Mal, I'd like you to meet Miss Cober."

"Pleased to know you ma' . . . Cober! Did you say Cober?" he asked in disbelief, turning to Clint.

Clint nodded.

"But—what for? I mean, is this your way to square things with her old man?" Clint could tell that Mal wouldn't like to play it that way.

"No, Mal," he said soberly. "I don't work things that way.

Miss Cober is with me for a good reason. And, if the reason is what I think it is, this'll be a mighty interesting meeting we'll be having tonight."

Mal studied Clint's face for a long minute, then something occurred to him. "Say, weren't those Double O men after you two? I thought I recognized one or two of them."

"That's right," Clint told him. "They were."

"Then—how come . . ." he gestured toward Annette who was sitting proudly erect, her face composed and serene despite the ordeal she'd just been through.

"Let's just ride on to Jake's, Mal," Clint suggested gently. "Ma-be all this will make sense a little later on."

While Mal walked away, shaking his head, to where his horse was tied to a clump of willows, Clint glanced at Annette. Their eyes held for a second, then her lips parted in a warm smile. Clint smiled back. Mal came riding up to them and Clint turned reluctantly away.

"Say, Mal," he asked, "how come you to be on hand in time to save our necks?"

"I was helping Pete Wieborn look for a milk cow he'd lost when I heard some shootin'. I looked up and recognized your roan and figured you'd been pickin' on the Double O again." He grinned at Clint. "This time, I says to myself, he's done bit off more'n he can chew."

Clint grinned at him. "I don't guess I need to say thanks, Mal."

"No, Clint. You don't need to say thanks."

They rode along in silence for a while, each busy with his own thoughts. When they came to the trail Mal drew up. "I reckon I'll see you at Jake's tonight."

"That's right," Clint told him.

Mal touched the brim of his hat and said, "Goodbye Miss Cober. I didn't aim to be rude back there. I was just surprised, that's all."

"You needn't apologize, Mal," she said softly, smiling at him. "I think I understand," she shot Clint a glance and added, "—now."

They waved to him as he turned away and then Clint led off in the direction of Jake Martin's place.

"From now on, Miss Cober," he said soberly, looking at her, "I guess you'll have to trust me, whether you want to or not."

She said his first name guardedly, as though she wasn't sure he'd like it, "Clint, I want to trust you, now. I—I guess I owe you an apology for some of the things I said."

"No, Annette," he spoke her name casually, as though he'd been doing it for years, "you don't owe me anything."

Neither of them said anything for a while after that. Clint admired this girl for her composure in the face of the discovery that the man who had posed as her father was possibly not her father—and, he was almost certain of this, she must have conjectured by now that that man might even be her father's murderer.

He turned to look at Annette. She was riding along, straight and graceful, a proud beautiful woman. A woman a man might like to have for a wife. Clint smiled faintly, to himself. She turned suddenly and saw the smile. But she didn't smile back.

"I wonder," she said soberly, "if they'll carry out their threat?"

"Threat?" Clint asked, his own smile fading.

"Yes. Bartow told me just before you killed him that unless I married Stub Langer this afternoon they would . . ." Her voice broke and she began to cry softly.

CHAPTER NINE

"I'M SORRY, Clint," Annette apologized, drying her eyes on a corner of the neck scarf she wore.

"That's alright," Clint told her. "You've been through a lot today, Annette. What about this threat Bartow made?"

"He said that unless I married Stub Langer this afternoon I'd—I'd never see sunrise tomorrow."

Clint avoided giving a direct answer. He knew that Bartow had meant what he'd said. Now that Annette knew—or at least he guessed she knew—what was going on, the Langers and Cober could not afford to have her running loose. Clint knew that the bullets they had dodged in their flight across the river had been meant for both of them.

"You were about to tell me something," he said, switching the subject, "just before Bartow came after you at the hotel."

"Yes, Clint. I wasn't sure then, about what had happened. But they had no way of knowing how much of the conversation I'd overheard. Then, when Bartow was sent to bring me back and when he told me I had to marry Stub Langer—well, I could guess the rest."

"I see," Clint said thoughtfully. Then he asked, "Just what did you hear Langer and—the man called Cober say to each other?"

He wished he could give the man another name. Every time he referred to the man who had pretended to be her father it was like pouring salt in her wounds.

"They were talking about your cow. Stub told—told that man, whoever he is, that you had aroused my suspicions about that cow. Then I heard my fath—the other man, I heard him tell Stub that if they didn't get rid of you that

you'd probably fool around and stumble onto the truth about what happened to Fred Cober."

Clint looked at her. He knew she was having a hard time saying all this, so he kept quiet.

"When I heard that," Annette went on, "I knew then why they all acted so strangely toward me at times."

"Had Stub Langer ever asked you to marry him?"

"Almost from the first time I set foot on the ranch. I never liked the man from the first time I saw him. He struck me as being very rude, and there was something, well—sneaky about him that I couldn't trust. I never could understand why the man who pretended to be my father kept insisting that I marry Stub."

"Do you have any idea about what might have happened to your father? Did they say anything definite?"

Annette shook her head, her lips set in a grim line. "No, Clint, they didn't. It's odd, I guess, that it should upset me so much. You see, I never really remembered my father. I was only twelve when he came out here ten years ago. Mother and I were to wait in Boston until he had built a house. Then we were to join him here. But my mother's health was never very good and she took a turn for the worse not long after he left. She died six years ago."

"Did your father stop writing to you?"

"Almost. I got a letter about every six months. He told me to stay on in school, and he sent me enough money to live on."

"Did you notice anything different about his letters? His handwriting, for instance?"

"Why—yes, I did, now that I think back. About a year after mother died I had a letter. The handwriting was different. I remember now that at the time he mentioned something about having broken his wrist in a fall from a horse and he apologized for the way he wrote."

Clint was silent. That would have been about the time the man who called himself Fred Cober had showed up in Wyoming. Stub Langer must have written the letters, copying the real Fred Cober's hand as nearly as he could. Clint doubted that Fred Cober had lived to write many letters after his wife had died.

"Oh, it's all so horrible!" Annette said with a shudder. "Poor Daddy! Mother never really wanted him to come out here in the first place."

"What did you think about it?" Clint asked casually. But it was an important question. To him, at least.

"Oh, while I was still fairly little I didn't think much about it one way or the other. But as I grew older I thought it would be heaven to live out here where there would be nothing but space for miles and miles. Right now I feel as though I'm living through some awful nightmare."

He wasn't quite sure what to do next himself. He didn't know whether Annette might have thought about it or not, but the men at the Double O wouldn't stop now until she had been silenced. Clint was wondering how the small ranchers would take it when they found out. They had their own troubles without having to add to them. Annette Cober would have to go somewhere. But where? Anyone who took her in was letting himself in for plenty of trouble.

Even if Clint could unearth the proof that Fred Cober had been killed by the Double O foreman and the others—which he was sure now was the case—who would take it upon themselves to retaliate? From what he'd seen of law in the Panhandle, there just plain wasn't any. There might not be a Texas Ranger any nearer than the state capital at Austin. That was days away. Even locating a United States Marshal would be a job.

Smoke was rising from the cottonwoods around a bend in the trail.

"That'll be Jake Martin's place," Clint told Annette.

Jake was unsaddling beside the corral when they rode into the clearing. He looked up sharply at the sound of horses, then relaxed when he saw Clint.

"You're getting jumpy, Jake!" Clint grinned, reining up alongside.

Jake smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Never can tell! I thought I heard some shootin' along the river a while back."

Clint noticed the sudden change of expression on Jake's face when he recognized the girl as Annette Cober. Jake looked at him, uncertainty in his eyes.

"You heard shooting alright," Clint said soberly. "And we were the ones getting shot at."

Jake shifted his feet uneasily. "Who done the shootin'?"

"Some of the Double O crowd. They'd have got us, too, most likely, if Mal Turpin hadn't opened up with that small cannon he carries for a saddle gun. It sort of discouraged them."

"Why should the Double O riders shoot at her?" he asked.

"Because," she answered for Clint in a quiet voice, "the man you know as Fred Cober is not my father. I found it out only today. They didn't want me to live to tell anyone about it."

Jake looked puzzled.

Clint said gravely, "It's the truth, Jake. I've found out a lot of things in the last few days."

Jake turned to Annette. "Miss Cober, I don't know what this is all about, but if Clint says it's so, then it must be. Now I reckon you'll not be goin' back to the Double O for a while. We can always find room for one more. Come along and I'll turn you over to Ellen."

Clint felt a warm glow in his heart as he watched Ellen take Annette into the cabin and he wondered why he had doubted that it might happen.

Jake came back as Clint was climbing stiffly from the saddle.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"Bartow put a rattler in my bed when I was out of the hotel yesterday."

"Good Lord! He didn't bite you, did he?" Jake asked incredulously.

Clint grinned. "No. This soreness I've got comes from the fire."

"Fire? Don't tell me you've been in a fire, too? For one lone hombre you can get into more trouble than a coyote in a henhouse!"

When Clint had finished telling about the snake and the fire, Jake said, "Clint, I'd kill a man who'd put a snake in my bed!"

The smile left Clint's face and he said soberly, "That's just what I did, Jake. He was one of the ones after the

Cober girl." Then Clint went on to explain to Jake what had happened up until the time Mal Turpin had met them at the river.

"Well I'll be doggoned!" Jake said quietly. "Do you suppose the Langers and that crowd killed Fred Cober?"

"Some five years ago, the way I figure it," Clint told him.

"Then, who is this man who says he's Cober?"

"Somebody who looked enough like Cober to give the Langers and Bartow big ideas. That three years this man spent up north was to give people around here time to forget just exactly what Cober looked like."

Clint suddenly remembered something and he cursed aloud that he could have forgotten it. The safe in Sadie McGowan's livery! Now that the word was out, and with Bartow dead, the Langers would be bound to go after it.

"Jake, I've just thought of something that might hold the key to this whole business. The Langers and Bartow took a small safe of Fred Cober's to Sadie McGowan for her to keep. That was just after the new Fred Cober left the Panhandle. And unless I'm mistaken, they wrote down what had happened and put it in that safe so that none of them could pull a dirty deal on the others. But now that this thing has busted loose they'll be after it."

Clint swung aboard the roan, wincing at the pain it gave him.

"Better let me go with you," Jake shouted, turning for the corral.

Clint stopped him. "You'd better stay here, Jake. In case somebody should come after Annette Cober."

Jake nodded. "I guess you're right, Clint, but I wish I could spread the word about what's happened. That Double O crowd might decide to cross the river any minute now."

"Most likely they'll wait for nightfall. By that time the others will be here for the meeting. You can decide among yourselves what to do."

"What do you think we ought to do, Clint?"

"Who's got the biggest place around here?"

"Pete Wieborn. He built himself a four-room rock house up on the slope toward the rimrock."

Clint studied for a minute. Then he said, "I think maybe you'd better all go there, Jake."

"I'd better get ready, then," Jake said. He said it calmly, but Clint could tell that Jake knew he might return in the morning to find his buildings a pile of smoldering ashes. There was no need to tell him to take what livestock he could with him. He'd do that anyway without Clint's telling him.

"There's one more thing, Jake. Sadie McGowan. If I get that safe to bring back with me, the Langers won't like it. They might be real mad at her for letting me take it."

"Bring her back here," Jake said without hesitation.

Clint shook hands with him and then turned to begin the long ride into Desperado City. Neither of them exchanged a word of farewell. The firmness of their handshake had said more than words.

The stable was deserted back at Sadie's. Clint was sure that meant Sadie was in her quarters at the back fixing supper. He dismounted and led the roan into the shadows between the livery and the darkened harness shop next door. Then he crept quietly toward the crack of light coming from beneath the door at the rear. He stood for a while outside, listening for voices inside. Satisfied that Sadie was alone, he knocked softly.

"Who is it?" he heard her ask in a low voice.

"Clint Driskill. Open up, Sadie."

The door opened and he stepped inside, closing it quickly behind him.

"Clint, what's the matter?" She could sense that he hadn't come to pay a social call.

"Bartow's dead. I had to kill him. The Cober girl knows something's happened to the real Fred Cober. What's more, the Langers know she knows."

"Oh, Clint! They'll kill her sure!"

Clint shook his head. "Not unless they kill a few others first. She's across the river. I got her away from them." He thought that he saw a sign of jealousy in Sadie's expression. But this was no time to worry about a woman's feelings. "They'll be after your safe, next."

"Oh, Clint—what'll we do?"

"Take it with us. You're coming with me. Let's harness a team and load the safe in your buckboard. You get the rig on the blacks and I'll carry the safe out and load it in. Better do it in the back where it's dark."

"Where will we go, Clint? They'll kill me if they ever find the safe gone!"

"Worry about that later. If you've got a gun, bring it along. Now we'd better move."

Clint crossed to the closet and opened it. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sadie take her shotgun from the wall. She slipped into a denim jacket, then pulled a long-barreled .45 from a table drawer and slid it under her waistband. As he uncovered the safe he heard the rattling of trace chains as she dropped the harness on one of the team.

The little safe, Clint found, was heavier than it looked. He dragged it to the door through which he'd come in from outside. Sadie kept the buckboard in the yard at the back. It would be easier to carry the safe out that way than through the stable. He cupped his hand over the lamp chimney, blew it out. Then he stepped to the door and opened it. The squeak of leather and soft sound of hoofs told him Sadie was leading the blacks into the yard. He bent over the safe, picked it up, and staggered down the steps with his burden.

It was starlight out, but Clint found his eyes still fogged from staring down the lamp chimney. He crossed the yard to the buckboard and with a grunt of relief he set it down heavily and stepped back. Something prodded him in the small of his back. It felt like a twig, but he hadn't recalled any trees back there. Maybe Sadie . . .

"Thanks, Driskill," a voice said calmly, pressing the gun more firmly into his back. "You saved us a lot of trouble. That's a lot of weight to carry!"

CHAPTER TEN

It was Cal Langer's voice, Stub's proddy younger brother. He wondered about Sadie, then he saw Stub come out of the shadows shoving her ahead of him.

"You little heifer!" Stub growled. "I ought to blow your damn head off!" He gave her a vicious jab with the shotgun, Sadie's own, which he held in his hand.

Clint was thinking that if it hadn't been for him the Langers would have taken the safe and ridden on, leaving her unharmed. But if she held it against him she didn't let it show in her face.

Cal Langer lifted Clint's gun from its holster, pitched it into a pile of manure beside the stable's rear door. Clint's hopes were sinking fast. Gun! What about the one Sadie had slipped inside her waistband? There was a hope that Stub Langer had taken only her shotgun, thinking that was all she had. Clint prayed that Sadie would have sense enough to wait for the right time to use it.

Cal was growing impatient. "Let's get the hell out of here before somebody shows up! Back these two over against the wall and give 'em what they got comin'."

Clint's heart pounded. He had counted on their being taken to the Double O, at least.

The crack of doom would sound no louder than the clicking noise of Cal thumbing back the hammer of his .45.

Stub bawled at him. "Hold it you damn fool! Do you want the whole town comin' over here?"

Cal let the hammer down gently, but there was nothing gentle in the look he gave his brother. "Alright, Stub. You got such big brains, what do you figger we oughta do with 'em?"

"Whatever we do we ain't gonna do it here. Let's stop all

this palaver and get aboard that rig. Driskill, you set in the back. Cal, you get in with him. Keep an eye on him so's he don't try to pull a fast one. Here, you take the scattergun. I'll drive. Sadie, you get up on the front seat with me. Now let's get outta here."

Clint felt awkward climbing into the rear of the buckboard. The heavy safe had chafed the front of his thigh and rubbed the burned skin raw. Cal Langer interpreted his slowness as defiance of a sort and gave him a hefty shove. "Get in there, damn you!"

Clint picked himself up from the bed of the rig without a word. There'd come a time, if he lived long enough, when he would make Cal regret his bad manners.

Once they hit the trail outside of town Stub whipped the team into a leg-stretching gait. The buckboard bounced and jarred over the ruts till Clint thought his tailbone would be driven through the floorboards. Cal, dangling his legs over the tailgate, had it little easier.

"Dammit, Stub," he bellowed, "slow 'er down before you shake me to pieces!"

Stub only chuckled and popped the blacks with the ends of the lines.

Clint heard the chuckle cut off short as Stub gave a grunt. He spun his head in time to see the driver chop his hand at Sadie's wrist and send the long-barreled revolver flying.

Cal had seen it, too. "I've had enough of this foolishness, Stub!" he yelled over the rattle of the buckboard. "Let's stop at the canyon and get these two out of our way."

Clint groaned inwardly. Sadie couldn't have picked a worse time than she did, with the Langers on the outlook for trickery. He looked around him at the hills. If he remembered correctly, the canyon lay about two miles ahead. The time for thinking was past. Now was the time to act.

But how? Cal was catty-cornered from him near the tailgate, half-turned so that the shotgun in the crook of his arm pointed at Clint's chest. Sadie was behind him on the seat, he could feel the brim of his hat brush her back. Stub sat on the other side, driving. He looked back at Cal. One blast from the shotgun would probably kill Clint and Sadie both. Then he noticed the safe.

Heavy as it was, the safe jiggled constantly with the motion of the buckboard. As Clint watched he saw that it was creeping, slowly, but still it was creeping, toward the back of the rig. He kept watching it, out of the corner of his eye so that Cal wouldn't catch on.

Then he felt the team slacken speed and they were going up a rise. He stole a glance at the safe. It had started to move back, more slowly now, because of the diminished speed. But still, it moved.

The rise leveled off as they crested the hill. The jogging increased as the team picked up speed. The safe was bouncing harder now. A wheel struck a rock and the buckboard pitched. The safe moved a good four inches.

"We're almost at the canyon," Stub called back. "Where do you reckon is the best place to . . ."

"Hold up a minute, Stub!" Cal yelled. "This damn safe's about to bounce outta the buckboard!"

Cal laid the shotgun aside. Holding on with one hand he tried to move the bouncing safe with the other. "Dammit, Stub! I said hold . . ."

Clint's foot caught him squarely in the chest, sent him tumbling backwards to land with a jolt on the hard ground. Without waiting to see the outcome, Clint turned while Cal was still in mid-air. He was just in time to see Stub's elbow bend as he went for his gun. Clint threw himself hard, then grabbed the seat to keep from going over on top of Stub. Sadie already had the lines and was urging the team to a faster pace.

A bullet *spanged* off an iron tire and went whining away. Clint crawled toward the tailgate, holding on for all he was worth. Sadie McGowan made Stub look like a timid old lady when it came to wild driving, he thought. From a sitting position he got both feet against the safe and heaved hard as it bounced. Two more shoves and it was lying on its side under the seat where he could put his feet on it. Then he climbed up beside Sadie and sat down.

"Where to now?" she asked, shouting to be heard.

"Keep headed for the river," Clint shouted back. He turned around, but the Langers had disappeared where the

trail curved around the side of a hill. "I think we can ease up now," he told Sadie.

She pulled the blacks down to a jogging gait and let them get their wind. Patches of foamy sweat showed where the harness touched their hide. "Good team you got there," Clint commented, reaching for tobacco and papers.

Sadie nodded. Each knew the other was trembling inside, but you'd have thought they were just out for a Sunday drive.

"There's Pete Wieborn's place," Sadie said, pointing to a group of buildings on the slope. "Do you think they'll try a raid?"

Clint shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe not tonight. But they'll come, you can count on that."

A quarter of a mile from the house a man with a rifle stepped out from behind a clump of willows. From the size of the gun Clint knew it was Mal Turpin.

"We thought for a while we wouldn't make it," Sadie said.

"How come?" Mal wanted to know.

Clint told him about the Langers. "That," he said, pointing to the safe under his feet, "gives them just one more reason to come over here."

Mal stepped up for a better look. "What's in it?" he asked.

"We won't know until we open it," Clint told him. "But when we do we may find out a lot of things. Who's up at the house?"

"Nearly everybody—except Nile Miller. They're all pretty anxious to talk to you, Clint. They want to find out the truth about what's happened down on the Double O."

"Maybe I can answer that better when we get this safe open," Clint conjectured. Then he asked, "How come Nile Miller didn't show up?"

"He wasn't home. Jake sent me to tell him to come up here, but there wasn't a soul around the place except the dog."

"That's funny," Clint frowned. "You don't suppose he got scared and left after they shot his horse the other day?"

"Darned if I know, Clint. It might be that he took his family to pick wild plums down the river and hadn't come back yet."

Clint thought for a minute. Then he said, "I'll take this safe on up to the house."

Mal watched them go, then went back to his post in the willow growth. Sadie drove the blacks as far as the front gate and stopped. The front door opened and several men crossed the yard to meet them. Clint noticed they all carried rifles. Jake Martin was one of them. Jake introduced the others as Pete Wieborn, Jeb Ash and Bill Wilson. All of them knew Sadie, having stabled their horses at her livery at one time or another. Clint shook hands all around.

"Here's the safe," Clint said. "Why don't you boys take it and see if you can't bust it open. If I can borrow a horse, I'd like to ride down to see if Nile Miller has come back yet. I think he ought to be warned, don't you?"

The four men exchanged glances. Then Jake turned to Clint. "We'd thought about that, Clint. But since Mal Turpin found them gone . . ."

"You mean you think Miller might've got cold feet and cleared out?"

"Meaning maybe he had a little notice of what was comin' and left for a while so's he wouldn't have to explain why he didn't want to join the rest of us. Meaning," Jake said evenly, "he might be on Cober's payroll."

"What makes you think that, Jake?"

"Well, after he come to my place the other day and told about Cober's men shootin' one of his best saddle horses I figgered he might need some help buryin' the critter. That afternoon I went down there. Miller was gone, but his wife was there. I told her I'd come to help Nile bury the horse. She looked at me like I was loco and said hadn't no animals died around their place that she knowed about. Funny a man wouldn't tell his woman about somebody shootin' one of his horses."

"Unless," Clint speculated, "he was afraid he might worry her."

"No, I don't think any horse was shot. Miller had said they'd shot it as they rode past the corral right next to the

house. His woman said she'd been there all day and hadn't seen a soul. Of course, I just asked if anybody'd been around. I didn't tell her what Nile had said or she'd have knowed somethin' was peculiar. Anyway, Clint, I've thought all along that Cober wasn't interested in Miller's place. It's beyond the ford, out of the hay flats. And there's a bluff behind it that cuts it off from the range above. It'd be no use to Cober."

"If that's the case," Clint said thoughtfully, "maybe I'd better ride down there and ask a few questions of Miller. If he's home."

"It might be risky, Clint," Pete Wieborn put in. "But if you're bound to go, there's a grey horse already saddled in my corral. You're welcome to him."

"Thanks," Clint told him. "You say Miller's place is just below the ford, Jake?"

Jake nodded. "First place. You can't miss it."

Clint asked to borrow a gun. "What happened to yours?" Jake wanted to know.

"Sadie will tell you about that," Clint grinned. "While she's telling you, see what you can do with that safe before I get back."

Jeb Ash held out his Winchester. "Better take this, Driskill. Pete's got a couple of extras in the house in case we need them."

"I'll feel a lot better with a saddle gun if you can spare it," Clint said, and he thanked him.

Clint missed the roan, but from the start he knew the grey would be a good stand-in. The land fell behind them as the grey ate up the distance in a long, effortless lope.

The Miller place was closer to the ford than Clint had pictured it. No light came from the windows, but then the Millers might be in bed. He reined in at the yard gate and got down.

The gate squeaked rustily as he opened it and Clint wondered that he hadn't heard the dog Turpin had mentioned. After his knocking brought no response he peered in through the kitchen window. Moonlight flooded the two-room cabin and he could see the open door leading into the bedroom. The beds were empty.

He walked back across the tiny yard, and then crossed the wagon lot toward the barn. Hand on his gun, he kept running his eyes around the clearing. There were the marks of wagon wheels outside the barn, but the building itself was empty. Even the henhouse was devoid of life. Not only hadn't Miller come back yet, but it began to look like the man might have left for good. What Jake had said about Miller maybe having gotten himself out of the way so he wouldn't have to throw in with the others tonight didn't make sense now. This move looked too permanent.

Clint stood in the barn doorway and pondered the situation. Maybe Miller had sold out to the Double O. Then why had he bothered to fabricate that lie about Cober's men shooting his horse? Just to give himself a good excuse for having left? Maybe. But Clint didn't think so.

He walked around behind the barn, peering in at every door he came to. Once he found what looked like a toolshed. It was dark inside. He struck a match and held it over his head. The tools were gone. A man might leave beds behind. He could make more beds. But he would need the tools to make them with. Just before the flame had died he had seen something that made him fish in his pocket for another match. There had been something shiny lying in a far corner.

Clint struck a second match and picked the object up from a pile of shavings. It was nothing but a strip of tin. Then he held the match closer. Something was stamped on the tin. Three letters. U. S. A.

That didn't mean much. Anything made in this country might be stamped that way. He started to throw the piece of tin away, but something stopped him. For some reason, unknown to himself, he put it in his pants pocket. Then he left the toolhouse.

After one last look around at the place Clint mounted the grey for the ride back to Wieborn's. Maybe they would have opened the safe by now. But for some reason he couldn't stir up much interest in the safe right now. His mind kept coming back to the strip of tin he'd found. He brought it from his pocket and looked at it in the moonlight as he rode along. There was something familiar about it. He'd seen

it before someplace. Not this particular piece, maybe. But one just like it. But for the life of him he couldn't remember where.

Then it hit him. At Fort Laramie, up in Wyoming. He'd been loafing around the cavalry post one afternoon, talking to some soldiers. He remembered watching one of them cut this strip of tin—a kind of seal, it must have been—from a case of government rifles!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CLINT TURNED the piece of metal over and over in his hand as he rode along. He was sure, now, what it was. But for the life of him he couldn't figure out what it might mean. A rancher like Miller would find an empty rifle case useful as a tool box. Still, Clint couldn't find much satisfaction in that explanation.

For one thing, finding the broken seal at Miller's place meant that the rifle case had been opened there. That meant it had been full of rifles when it arrived. Clint tried to remember how many guns a case like that would hold. A dozen maybe.

What would Miller do with a dozen rifles? Sell them? Not very likely. Somebody might start asking where he got them. If there was a sensible explanation Clint couldn't find it. He shrugged his shoulders and stuck the piece of tin in his shirt pocket and buttoned the flap.

The shadow of a cloud crossing the moon made him look up. Other clouds were following the first. A completely dark night would make it hard to see Cober's men when they crossed the river. It would also make it hard for Mal Turpin and the other guards to distinguish friend from foe. Clint urged the roan into a lope.

At first he thought the glow in the sky toward the river was a flash of heat lightning. When he saw it was the reflection of flames he reined in suddenly. It seemed to be coming from Jake Martin's place. Then he swore softly and swung toward the river to make sure.

He was still a half mile away when he knew the truth. Even through the heavy growth of cottonwoods he could see the flames licking at the dry lumber. Sparks showered skyward as an outbuilding caved in.

Cober's men! They had crossed the river and were firing the small ranches along the valley. Clint swore again. This time at his own stupidity for not suggesting that they move the guards closer to the river. Now the only chance to save the places along the valley was to try to bring enough riders from Pete Wieborn's place. Maybe they could stop Cober before he got too far.

Without slackening speed Clint wheeled the grey and pounded for the Wieborn place. He had borrowed a good horse, but it was not fast enough. Something reached his ears even above the din of the pounding hoofs and the shrieking wind. It was a sound that he had heard only once before in his life. At the top of the shallow rise that hid the Wieborn place from view he reined in cautiously behind a juniper. The sound was unmistakable now. A high-pitched, blood-tingling yell that had struck terror to the heart of many a settler. The war cry of the Comanche!

For a split second Clint sat glued to the spot, frozen by the unexpectedness of what he saw. Before him, on the upslope leading from the river to the Wieborn place, were the Comanches. Thirty or more there were, riding pell-mell, like painted demons brandishing rifles and an occasional flaming firebrand. Now Clint understood the reason for Nile Miller's sudden departure. Now he knew who had fired the Martin place. And he knew what Miller had done with the government rifles from the case he had opened in his toolshed.

Behind it all was Cober—or the man who called himself Cober. Now no one could stop the Double O from taking over the land north of the river. It wouldn't be Cober's fault that the Comanche had become restless on his reservation over in the Indian Territory. A barrel of whisky, a few rifles, and a bit of shrewd oratory to make the Comanche believe that the white settlers north of the Canadian had designs on Comanche land inside the Territory. That would have been Nile Miller's job. Clint wondered how much Miller had been paid by Cober for selling out his neighbors.

One look was enough to let Clint know that there was no chance of outrunning the Comanche raiders. Already they were beginning their endless circling tactics which

would let them pour bullet after bullet into the besieged ranchhouse. The ranchers inside would be forced to defend themselves from every quarter, never knowing at which point in the maddening circle the fatal break might occur which would bring the firebrands raining down on the tinder-dry roof.

Clint thought of Annette. The thought that before this night was out some whisky-crazed Comanche might gloat over a golden scalp lock at his belt spurred Clint to action.

Out of sight of the Wieborn place once more he pushed the grey at a dead run for the river. He wondered if Mal Turpin and the other guards had been able to make the safety of the stone house. A fleeting figure on horseback gave the answer. He glanced farther up the valley. Two more horsemen were racing for the ford. The one he had seen first, the one ahead of him, must be Mal Turpin. All three were obviously heading for Desperado City for help. Clint felt that any help they might find would come too late. It would take an hour at least to make the round trip. His only chance would be to head them off.

Slipping the Winchester from its boot he fired and saw the faint spurt of dust in the moonlight. The shot had fallen short. He spurred the grey, but the gallant animal was already sleek with soapy sweat. The distance separating him from the fleeing rider narrowed ever so slightly. He fired again, higher this time.

Just before a cloud passed over the moon Clint saw the dust spurt in front of Turpin's horse, saw Mal turn in the saddle. Clint waved frantically. Then the cloud shadow fell and he couldn't be certain.

The grey was moving so fast that he overshot the waiting rider and wheeled around in a scattering of dust.

"Ride for town!" Mal shouted. "Got to get help. Comanches busted out of the Territory and . . ."

"No time to go get help," Clint shouted back, coming alongside. He pointed to the two shadows flitting through the cottonwoods by the river. "Let's get those boys. The four of us maybe can do something."

The other riders were easily intercepted, having come

from farther up the river. Clint and Mal Turpin cut them off.

Clint glanced at the darkening sky. The moon shone only faintly through breaks in the clouds now. "Where can we find horses?" he asked the others.

"Horses, hell!" one of the new men said sharply. "What we need is men—men with guns."

"Next best thing," Clint snapped, "is horses. We haven't got time to ride to town. We'd get back too late to save those folks. The Comanches won't know whether or not the horses have riders in this light. Now let's get horses."

"Jeb Ash usually keeps eight or ten around his place. He breaks 'em to sell," Mal said.

"Lead the way, Mal," Clint said quickly, "there's no time to waste."

It seemed to Clint like they rode twenty miles before they came to Jeb Ash's place. The corral was empty.

Clint was looking around. "Over there," he said suddenly, pointing to where a break in the clouds let a patch of moonlight through on the flat. "Horses. Jeb must have let them out in case Cober's gang came along. We'll run those horses, pretty well spread out. The four of us will scatter as far as we can and shuttle back and forth behind them, shooting as soon as we get close enough. The Comanches will think a whole damn cavalry regiment is after them. Now let's ride!"

There were only eight horses on the slope. Clint hoped the surprise and confusion would make it seem like more. The four of them spread out and began the drive. The grazing animals lifted their heads, then one of them whinnied and they took off over the hill.

Riding hard through the feeble light of the filtered moon the four horsemen drove the tiny herd at a dead run across the upslope. A pale light flickered up ahead, just over the rise. Then it grew in brightness till the low-scudding clouds were colored a brilliant orange.

"Ride, dammit, ride!" Clint bellowed uselessly into the wind. But the others had seen the flames and knew their meaning. They came over the crest in a line abreast, the

herd pounding along in front of them. Clint groaned when he saw Pete Wieborn's place.

The barns and other outbuildings were burning furiously, the flames whipped by the wind that had risen with the clouds. Silhouetted against the flames could be seen the cavorting figures of the Comanches as they circled round and round, heaving firebrands or firing into the flames. Even as Clint watched, the timbers supporting the roof of the house shuddered and collapsed, sending sparks shooting high into the air.

No one was quite certain afterward just how it happened. The Comanches heard the thunder of hoofs bearing down on them, heard the shots, felt their sting. Three raiders died before the others could gather their wits sufficiently to flee.

Clint rode straight in for the house, dismounting only when the grey whinnied in terror at the nearness of the flames and reared on its hind legs. Protected somewhat from the searing heat by the rock walls which still stood, Clint staggered blindly toward the ruined building, in the faint hope that somehow someone might have lived to be rescued. A rough hand fell heavily on his shoulder, sent him sprawling backwards away from the fire.

"It's no damn use, Clint!" Mal shrieked in his ear. "There ain't nobody could possibly have lived through that!"

Clint stood dejectedly inside the yard, half-conscious of the waves of heat emanating from the glowing embers and heated walls of rock. He felt that if he had acted earlier against Cober it might have been prevented. If he had put a proposition to Jake Martin then, perhaps they might have organized the other small ranchers and pressed Cober to a showdown. Since bloodshed seemed inevitable from the start what could they have lost? Certainly it would have been better than this.

He had held back because he had wanted no one to feel that he was using their differences with Cober as an excuse to gain help in settling his own personal score. That reluctance, he felt now, had been prompted by pride on his

part. He had wanted to be sure no one could point to Clint Driskill and say, That man caused us trouble!

But for his stubborn pride, too, he felt his wife might yet be living. It had been pride that made him stick on Wind River after the others had left. Wouldn't it have been better to have gone to the other small ranchers and asked that they all stay and help each other?

He felt a hand on his shoulder again. Gentler, this time, but still firm. He turned and saw Mal standing there. "Don't take it thataway, Clint," the redhead said softly. It was as though he had read Clint's mind. "You done what you could. All of us did."

"I could have got us all together sooner, instead of trying to play a lone hand. I'd seen Cober work before. I should have known better."

"Maybe you could have with Cober. But, like I say, who'd have thought . . ."

Clint interrupted, fishing in his shirt for the strip of tin. "If I'd have gone after Cober the Comanche would have stayed in the Territory." He handed the piece of metal to Mal.

"I don't get what you mean," Mal told him, looking at the thing in his hand with a puzzled expression.

Clint told him about the rifles. The other two riders crowded close to listen as he talked. When he'd finished, one of them walked out of the yard to where the body of a Comanche lay sprawled on the hardpan. From the ground nearby he picked up a rifle and brought it close to the light from the dying fire. They looked it over.

"Well I'll be damned!" Mal Turpin said, awed. "There's the stamp, United States Army."

Clint pulled his hat down on his head. "I'm going after Miller. If any of you want to come along, I'll be happy to have you."

"I'll go," Mal said angrily. "I'd like to see that bastard hang!"

"So would I," Clint sighed. "After this here tonight. But," he added reluctantly, "the man's got a wife and kids. I'm wondering how many wrongs it takes to make a right."

One of the other riders, a man named Al Logan, spoke

up. "Miller didn't think about others' wives and kids." He nodded at the ruined house. "I worked for Pete Wieborn. He's in there. So's his wife and three young'uns. Jake Martin and his family's in there, along with Jeb Ash's, Bill Wilson's, the little widow McGowan and that Cober girl. I'd say Miller's family'd be well off with him hung!"

Clint looked away toward the rimrock where the moon was trying to struggle through the clouds. Maybe Al was right.

"Let's try to pick up Miller's trail," he said softly. "Traveling by wagon like he is, we ought to catch up before sundown tomorrow."

They turned away, the four of them, after a long last look at the blackened stone and charred timbers.

"Wait a minute, Clint," Mal said suddenly. "Listen a minute—I thought I heard somebody yell."

The four of them froze in their tracks, ears straining into the night around them. For a full minute they stood like statues.

"There! Over there!" Clint said as he started running. The others had heard it too, now.

Beyond the house lay a small hillock, near where the upslope ran up against the steep drop from the rimrock above. In the side of the hillock, half-hidden by a twisted juniper, was a heavy wooden door.

"It looks like a cave!" Clint said, excitement rising in him. "But how did they ever get out of the house?"

"They couldn't have!" Mal shouted, running alongside. "Them Comanches would have cut 'em down in a minute."

They were at the door now, and began calling to the voices they heard inside.

"It's barred from the outside," Clint noticed. "That means they must have come in another way."

"Hell, I should've thought of that!" Al Logan groaned. "That's Pete's storm cellar. I'd forgot all about the tunnel under the ground from the house. Pete built it ten years ago, before the Comanche had been penned up inside the Territory. He built it in case of a raid. I'd plumb forgot about the tunnel. I knew about the storm cellar, but it didn't dawn on me they could've got to it from inside."

Clint heaved and the heavy bar lifted from the latch. Together they pulled back the door. Long neglected, it was partially blocked by drifted soil and growth of weeds. The sound of excited voices became a loud murmur. At last the door gave, swung wide.

Pete Wieborn was the first out. He took one look at his house, then smiled grimly. "I'll build another. There's enough left of that one to start. But never mind that. We're all damn lucky to be alive!"

Clint grinned happily. "Maybe you think we're not glad to see you people! We thought sure everybody *had* been burned alive."

There were cries of joy as the women emerged into the fresh, clean air. Someone tried to soothe a frightened youngster, another gasped at the sight of the ruined ranch buildings. Clint stood a little aside so that the men wouldn't notice the moisture around his eyes. He saw someone coming toward him, running. It was Sadie.

"Clint!" She said it half-sobbing, half-laughing with mild hysteria. Then her arms went around him, holding him tight. He understood how it must have been for the women, cooped up in there, not knowing when the Comanches might break through the cave door. Still, he felt uncomfortable, having her cling to him like this in front of so many people. Then he heard a voice behind him.

"Oh, Clint! I was afraid they'd kill . . ."

The sound of Annette's voice broke off suddenly with a little gasp. Clint tried to turn, awkwardly conscious of Sadie's arms around his waist.

The moon broke through a cloud for an instant, then disappeared again. He saw Annette's face in that instant, before she turned away. There had been a shocked hurt in her eyes at seeing him and Sadie standing there. Clint wanted to go after her. But he couldn't.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WHEN THE FIRST confused rush of excited questions and answers was over everyone fell silent. The silence was a mixture of thankful relief and grim determination to take up where they had left off.

"How many other places did they fire?" Pete Wieborn asked Clint.

"Only Jake Martin's. I headed for here as soon as I saw his place burning, but I was too late."

There followed a brief explanation of how the four riders had come together and how they had driven off the Comanches by trickery.

"Can't for the life of me figger," Jeb Ash said wonderingly, "what riled them Indians up like that. There's been no hint of trouble for more'n five years."

"You can thank Nile Miller and Fred Cober for tonight's work," Clint said bitterly.

"What's that you say?" Jake Martin asked, pushing forward.

Clint explained once more about the rifles. "And unless I'm mistaken," he concluded, "Miller connived with Cober to bring this off."

Nobody said anything for a while after that. Several of the men exchanged questioning glances with each other, then looked at Clint. Finally Jeb Ash spoke up. "Dris-kill," he said slowly, as though he disliked what he had to say, "none of us here have much doubt about Cober wantin' our land. But there's always a chance that this thing can be settled peaceable. There's been enough harm done here tonight without addin' to it."

Clint looked at the man with disbelief. "What makes you take that attitude, Jeb?" he asked quietly.

"For one thing, we all had a little talk after you'd gone down to Miller's place this evenin'. For another, we opened that there safe you brought up here."

Clint's heartbeat quickened. "Lordy, Jeb! I'd forgotten about the safe. What'd you find in it?"

Jeb Ash's expression was stolid and his eyes met Clint's unwaveringly, almost challengingly. "Nothin'!"

Clint's eyes widened in surprise. "You mean—it was empty?"

Jeb nodded solemnly. Clint was beginning to understand a little more clearly now.

"Driskill," Jeb went on, "we don't like Fred Cober, any more'n you do. But we got different reasons. We think we can settle this with Cober in our own way. For my part, the man is mostly bluff. If we all stick together he'll know he ain't goin' to scare us easy. Maybe then he'll get tough—maybe he won't. But we ain't hankerin' to start nothin' that'll get our wives and kids shot at like they was tonight."

"But, Jeb," Clint protested, "what about Sadie McGowan? Nobody knows better than she what Fred Cober's like. Surely you're not going to wait around for . . ."

Pete Wieborn broke in. "Sadie's a woman, Driskill. Hell ain't got no fury like a scorned woman. I ain't sayin' Cober's a saint. And maybe he has turned out to be a bad hombre in the last few years. But it could be that Sadie would like to see Cober killed same as you."

Clint looked at the faces around him. "Now I think I understand," Clint said evenly. "You figure that because Sadie and me both have reason to dislike Cober that we've teamed up and tried to get you people to help us fight our battle. And I guess," Clint said a trifle angrily, "that you think Cober's own daughter wants to see him killed, too!"

Jeb shrugged his shoulders. "It'd been a long time since she seen her old man. Maybe she didn't like him when she came out here after bein' away from him ten years. Maybe her daddy had his heart set on her marryin' up with one of the Langers, for all I know. A good-lookin' young cattle-man like you would make her a good husband—if her dad could be got out of the way. And a ranch like that would be a mighty nice piece of land for a fella to fall into like that."

Clint took a step forward, half-raising a clenched fist. Then he stopped himself in time, let his anger subside a little.

"Jeb, you seem to have a pretty damn poor opinion of me. Under ordinary circumstances I'd be inclined to beat the living hell out of a man who said the things you just said. But I guess I don't exactly blame you for thinking the way you do. When Mal Turpin came to see me the other day, to ask me to come out here and talk over forming a front against Cober, I told him that I didn't want anybody to get any ideas about me trying to take advantage of you folks to fight my own personal grudge. But I see you got them anyway."

Jeb stared at him unblinkingly. "We was to have a meetin' here tonight to talk over how we'd stand up to Cober. You seemed to be a good man to lead us. But it looked mighty funny to some of us that you picked tonight to come ridin' up with the Cober girl and then went back to town for Sadie McGowan and that safe of hers. Seems to me you was tryin' just a little too hard to convince us what a bad hombre this Cober is supposed to be."

Clint looked around at the circle of faces about him. Each one stared back at him unflinchingly, each one mirrored the same sentiments Jeb Ash had expressed. When he came to Jake Martin, Clint stopped.

"Jake, I suppose you feel the same way?"

Jake avoided looking Clint squarely in the eyes. "Clint, goddam it, I'm beholdin' to you for the help you gave me with Cal Langer and Ed Bartow that night, don't think I'm not." There was pained embarrassment in the big man's voice as he went on. "But just the same, I can't help feelin' that it might have ended peaceable enough if you hadn't been there. Besides, I got my wife and kid to think about, too. And there's a lot of truth in what Jeb just said about us bein' able to hold our own with Cober without anybody gettin' hurt."

Mal Turpin stepped forward. "I can see how you fellers feel," he said glancing around the circle, "but I've got no family and I got an idea Clint's tellin' the truth. For one thing, how else can you explain the way them Double O

riders was shootin' at him and the Cober girl that day I was lookin' for Jeb's cow down by the river?"

Pete Wieborn answered him. "Powder and lead's cheap enough. It don't take much of a shot to deliberately miss a man."

Clint fell silent. Now it looked as though his only chance to convince these people was to find some way to prove what he and Sadie and Annette felt was true—that Fred Cober was not Fred Cober, and that Nile Miller and Cober both had had a hand in the Comanche raid. It was no longer a matter of his own grudge against Cober. It was, he admitted reluctantly, a matter of his own pride again.

Slowly he walked over to the grey and led the animal back to where the men stood watching him. Pulling the Winchester from the saddle boot he handed it to Jeb Ash. "Thanks, Jeb, for the use of your gun. I'll pick up one from that Comanche over there on the ground. And here's your grey, Pete. He's a good runner." Then he turned to Mal. "I see Sadie's blacks are in the corral. Lucky it didn't burn with the barn. The buckboard's gone, so I guess we'll have to use yours if you've got one."

"I've got one, but it's down at my place on the river." Then he looked at Clint with a puzzled expression. "But how come you want a buckboard?"

"We'll have to come back to pick up Sadie McGowan and Annette Cober," he told Mal. And he nearly added, Because they're not welcome here, either! But that would have been uncharitable.

"If those blacks are tame enough," Mal put in, "why not let the two women and you ride them bareback as far as my place? They can double up on one horse and you can ride the other. I can lead 'em with a rope."

Clint walked over to where Annette and Sadie were standing with a group of women and drew them aside. Gently, he explained the circumstances. Sadie was crestfallen and deeply hurt by the insinuations, but Clint persuaded her to leave as quietly as possible. Annette listened to him in silence, and Clint had the uneasy feeling that her spirit had at last broken under the rapid succession of cruel blows she had suffered. He felt the guilty realization that when

she had found him locked in Sadie's arms her spirit had begun to crack. This was not the place to explain to her that she had misinterpreted what she saw. Sadly, he watched the two of them walk over to where Mal stood holding the pair of blacks. Then he returned to the circle of silent men.

He said evenly, "I don't hold any hard feelings over this. Only I want to warn you that the danger's not over yet. Keep an eye out for Double O riders."

"We'll be able to look out for ourselves from here on, Driskill," Pete Wieborn said in an unfriendly tone.

"Alright, Pete. Be sure you do. I'll come back here in a day or two with Nile Miller in tow. I want you to hear from his own mouth just what went on between him and Fred Cober—and the Comanches."

"If you find him," Jeb Ash spoke up, "we'd like to ask him how much Cober paid him to try to scare us. But I'm thinkin', Driskill, you're goin' to be mighty disappointed otherwise. Miller was just a spineless maverick who got scared himself and cashed in on it. He'd never have the guts to connive with the Comanche like you say."

"I hope," Clint said with a wry smile, "that I'll be able to convince you otherwise. The way it stands now, I'll never be able to go after Cober by myself. I'll be frank to admit I need your help. The only way I can count on it is to make you see what's been going on. Besides," and then he paused, "clearing my name with you people means just as much to me as seeing that Fred Cober pays for killing my wife and unborn baby."

Jake Martin stepped forward suddenly, his hand outstretched. "No hard feelin's, Clint," he said huskily. "It's just that I . . ."

Clint took the proffered hand. "Sure, Jake. I understand. And when I come back here with Nile Miller I know you'll be one of the first to throw in with me."

Clint turned away without another word and mounted the remaining black horse Mal was holding.

On the long ride to Mal Turpin's place on the river no one spoke. As they dismounted in front of the one-room cabin, Sadie broke the silence.

"Where do we go from here?" she asked, her voice tinged with bitterness.

"Mal's going with me to find Miller," Clint told her, glancing at Annette as he spoke. But the dispirited girl seemed not to be listening nor caring. "It wouldn't be safe to leave you two here. I guess we'd better take you to Art Dunlop's place in town. Art and his wife will see that nothing happens to you. But, whatever you do, don't leave there till we come back."

The girls stretched out on the two ticks which Mal had filled with straw and put in the back for them. The two men took their places on the seat. Sadie McGowan immediately fell asleep. Clint looked back, and though it was dark now without the moon he could see that Annette was lying there listlessly, staring with unseeing eyes at the dark canopy of clouds overhead. He turned his head away and began to roll a cigarette.

The next day they rolled quietly into Desperado City. Mal pulled up in front of the silent hulk of the Canadian Palace. While Mal stepped down to awaken the girls, Clint went inside.

The lobby was empty. Clint crossed to the dining room and tried the door. It was locked. Then Mal and the girls came in.

"You take the girls up to my room. Number Eight." He reached behind the desk. "Here's the key. Better get them out of sight before somebody sees them here and tells Cober. I'll go around back and try to wake up Art Dunlop."

Mal took the key and the three of them trooped wearily up the stairs. Clint passed through the rear door, past the bathhouse to where the Dunlops had their living quarters. It was breaking light in the east now, and through an open window Clint could see what looked like a bedroom. He rapped gently on the weathered sill with his fist.

"Art!" he called softly. "Art Dunlop!"

A figure in the bed stirred, then sat up sharply. "Who is it?"

"Clint Driskill, Art. Can you come out to the desk, I want to talk to you. Somebody might hear me if I stand here."

A few minutes later, inside the deserted dining room, he

told the sleepy proprietor what had happened. Then he delivered specific instructions to Art not to permit the girls to leave their room for a minute. "Have their meals sent up to them, and if anybody asks questions, tell them you've got a sick man in the room. Either Mal or me will get word to you inside of a week."

"Where you two goin'?" Art asked sleepily.

"After Miller."

"You'll find him south of here somewheres. He passed through town early yesterday mornin', wagon loaded and his whole family aboard."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

UPSTAIRS, Clint found Mal Turpin and the two girls waiting in Room Eight. "It's all set," Clint said, and he handed the key to Sadie. Annette was sitting by the window, staring absently out at the growing sunrise. "Room Ten, at the end of the hall," he went on. "Art will have all your meals sent up."

Sadie stood up and walked to the door. Annette followed her, going ahead into the hall. Sadie hesitated for a minute, looking at Clint. He reminded her, "Remember, don't show your faces out of the room until you hear from us."

She smiled faintly. "We won't, Clint. Take care of yourself," and turning to Mal, "You, too, redhead!" Clint noticed something in the way she smiled at Mal, and he wondered. Maybe, after she got to talking with Annette . . .

After the women had left Mal pulled off his boots. "I'm all done in," he groaned. "After last night I could sleep for a month." He took off his pants and shirt and tossed them across a chair. Then he dropped on the bed with a long sigh. "Yessir," he yawned, "for a whole month."

Clint grinned as he pulled off his own footgear. "Then you'd better sleep mighty fast, friend. We're pulling out of here at noon."

Despite the fact that it was midday, the two riders coaxed Art's wife to feed them a breakfast of flapjacks, eggs and sidemeat. The meal finished, they pushed back their chairs, shook hands with Art and crossed the street to Sadie's livery stable.

Clint's roan was stabled where Art had put him after finding the horse the morning after the brush with the Langers. The hotel proprietor had come over twice since in

the day that followed to feed the animals. And he had promised to go on doing that until Clint and Mal returned.

"Sadie's got two mares back there," Clint told Mal. "She says the one with the white spot on her forehead is the best horse."

Clint walked over to where his domino cow stood munching hay. "You'll have to wait awhile, old girl," he said, as much to himself as to the cow. "We've got work to do yet." Then he lifted his saddle from the wall peg and spread the blanket on the roan.

Mal came up as Clint was checking the load in his Winchester. "I see you got your handgun back," he said, pointing to Clint's .45.

Clint told him that Art had found it where the Langers had thrown it that night. "He cleaned it up to use himself," Clint said grimly. "Figured I wouldn't ever be having need of it again."

As they rode south out of town Clint tried to figure which way Miller might logically have gone. A little ways out of town the trail would split, Art had told him. One road veered southwest, down toward Amarillo and the New Mexico Territory. The other held south, on toward Childress on the Red River. From there, Art had said, Miller could go on south and east in the direction of Austin. Or, he could follow the south bank of the Red, heading into east Texas.

Nile Miller had come to the Panhandle from Louisiana. It didn't seem likely, Clint thought, that a man of Miller's caliber would head deeper into the Southwest after having let himself be run out of the Panhandle. More than likely he would be making tracks for country he knew. That satisfied Clint that Miller would take the trail for Childress, hoping to swing back east for Louisiana. When Clint and Mal came to the place where the trails split they kept on south.

It was mid-afternoon when they spotted sign of a camp alongside the trail. Clint got down and looked around. There were wagon tracks, not over two days old, and no rain had fallen to mottle the loose dirt covering the ashes of the fire.

"Look over yonder!" Mal said, pointing. A clump of mes-

quite beside a draw was littered with white objects. Clint walked over.

"Chicken feathers," Clint nodded, picking one up. "That's Miller alright. He took his chickens with him. No cattleman passing this way would carry chickens."

When Clint was mounted again and they had started down the trail, Mal said, "He can't be too far ahead."

"How far to Red River?" Clint asked.

"About an even hundred miles south from Desperado City."

Clint studied for a minute. "He'll probably push it pretty hard the first few days. At least till he's sure nobody's trailing him. My hunch is that, with the start he had, we'll catch up with him just as he settles to camp on the Red. About sundown tomorrow."

When they started to look around for a likely spot to bed down Clint took a long look at the sky. "We'll get wet tonight, Mal."

"I've been wet before," Mal grinned.

They unsaddled and picketed their horses in the lee of a creek bank, far enough from the water so that a heavy rain wouldn't wash them out. After a meal of beans and bacon Art had given them, washed down with scalding black coffee, they picked a high spot and untied their bed rolls. The first soft splattering of rain fell sizzling into the fire just as they lay down. With a poncho pegged down over their beds and draped over the saddle pillow at the head, they paid little heed to the final torrent that came. Before the first crack of thunder rumbled up the little valley and out across the plains they were sound asleep.

Clint stirred at daybreak. He threw aside the poncho and blanket. The sky above was deep blue, and to the west a solitary star lingered. He stretched and yawned. Then he looked over to where Mal Turpin lay huddled beneath the olive-green poncho. Clint picked up a rock and flung it at the sleeping figure.

With a startled shout Mal sat bolt upright, squinting in the light of the new-breaking day and fumbling for his gun. Then he saw Clint sitting there, laughing silently. An embarrassed grin crossed his face, gave way to a yawn.

"Let's eat and ride," Clint suggested, pulling on his boots.

Half an hour later they were saddled, after having rolled their beds, eaten and washed the frying pan and coffee pot. Clint kicked dirt on the fire and they mounted.

They paused briefly at noon for a meal, then were on their way again. As the afternoon shadows began to lengthen they grew silent and watched the rolling landscape ahead as they rode.

Mal asked a question that had occurred to Clint before. "Supposin' Miller won't come?"

Clint knew what he meant. The man had his wife and kids with him. If Miller chose to shoot, it would be hard to shoot back.

"He'll come," Clint said shortly. But he wasn't so sure.

The sun was an orange ball sinking slowly into the flat land to the west when Mal pointed ahead. "There she is!"

The white canvas of a wagon top stood among a clump of trees. Above it a thin feather of smoke drifted lazily skyward till an upper eddying breeze flattened it out in a yellow layer. Both riders eased their horses into a lope.

When they were still two hundred yards away they saw the man look up. He had been sitting on a log, a woman beside him. Three kids were hunkered about the fire, the oldest not over ten.

"He's seen us," Mal said, excitement tinging his voice.

Clint nodded, tight-lipped. They rode on without diminishing their speed. The man stepped across the log, picked up a rifle leaning against the wagon. Clint and Mal exchanged glances. A hundred feet away they dropped their horses to a walk. Fifty feet away they dismounted.

"Howdy, Miller," Mal said flatly.

The woman gave a relieved little laugh. "Why—it's Mal Turpin, Nile!"

Miller forced a laugh. "So it is. Howdy, Mal!" But Clint noticed the man didn't lay the rifle down. The woman noticed it, too. This is bad, Clint told himself. The poor woman likely had no inkling what her man had been up to.

"Set down and eat," she said to Mal. "You and your friend are welcome. Nile, land-o'-goshen! Put that gun down!" Then

she explained laughingly, "He's so afraid something's goin' to happen to us. Land's sake—anybody'd think there was still Indian trouble around here!"

She noticed that nobody laughed at that, and her smile faded.

"What brings you down on the Red, Turpin?" Miller asked. Clint noticed he was a shifty-eyed man, thin and nervous, with a weak lower jaw that trembled now when he spoke.

Mal handed it straight to him. "Injun trouble," he said quietly. Clint watched Miller's face for a reaction. He found it. Miller's face turned a shade whiter than the canvas wagon cover.

"In-Injuns? There ain't no danger of them comin' down this far, is there?" he dodged.

"Not unless you told them to," Clint said evenly.

The woman's hands flew to her throat. At the mention of Indians the kids gathered about her, the ten-year-old trying bravely not to.

"What's this man sayin', Nile?" she asked nervously. "Who is he?"

"Name's Driskill, ma'am," Clint said, doffing his hat politely. "Clint Driskill. I've come here with Mal to ask your husband a few questions. Now, ma'am, maybe you could persuade him to lay aside that gun. If he can answer the questions rightly, he won't need it."

"I know you," Miller tried to bluff. "You're the gunman who came down here to stir up trouble with Fred Cober."

They weren't standing three feet apart now. Clint noticed that Miller backed away a little. Clint followed him for a step. "I'm no gunman, Mrs. Miller," he said politely. "You can ask Mal for the truth of that."

"He's lyin'!" Miller snarled. "It's just like I told you, Martha. The others along the river brought this man in to make trouble. I'm a peaceable man with a family and don't want no trouble. That's why we're a'goin' back to Louisiana, to get away from the trouble that's brewin'."

"I see that's a new government rifle you've got there," Clint said suddenly. It wasn't, but he wanted to see what the

man would do. Miller did what Clint thought he would. His guilty conscience made him look down at the gun in his hand. In that instant Clint moved in.

Miller caught on to the trick too late. He looked up and saw Clint coming at him. He tried to step back, raising the rifle as he did. The log was behind him and he went off balance just as Clint dove for his middle, pushing the rifle aside as they both fell to the ground.

The woman screamed. The ten-year-old, spurred to a degree of bravery by the attack on his father, fell on Clint, kicking and screaming and crying. Mal pulled him away as gently as he could.

"Easy, Billy. Clint ain't goin' to hurt your daddy." He turned to Mrs. Miller.

"What's this all about?" she asked uncertainly.

"That's what we want to tell you, ma'am," Mal told her. "If you'll just ask your young'uns to stand over there a ways."

Mrs. Miller shooed the children away, telling them to go and play beside the creek. Reluctantly they obeyed, but all thought of play had left them. They stood just out of ear-shot, watching the scene beside the wagon.

Clint stood up, Miller's rifle in his hand. The man wasn't wearing a handgun he noticed. "Sorry to have to do this, Mrs. Miller," he apologized. "But I think it's best you know what kind of a man your husband really is. You can make up your own mind about what to tell the children—but I'm afraid it won't be pleasant doing it."

"Wh-what do you mean?" she asked nervously.

"Don't listen to them, Martha," Miller whined. "This is some kind of a trick."

Clint left Mal to watch Miller and glanced around inside the wagon. There was bedding there, spread out in readiness for the night, and under the bedding were boxes of household goods. Hating himself for what he was having to do, Clint began to pry around among the boxes. It didn't take him long to find what he was after. He dropped the straw mattress back with a sigh and turned back to the fire.

The woman was crying softly when he came up. Mal looked at him sadly, then turned back to keep an eye on Miller who was standing there, his face livid with rage. "It's

a pack of damn lies, I tell you!" he stormed at his wife. "What kind of a woman are you, takin' his word against that of your own husband?"

Before the poor woman could answer, Clint spoke up to Miller. "Nice toolbox you got in the wagon, Miller. It's not often a man can get hold of a brand new government rifle case like that."

"What're you drivin' at, Driskill?" Miller asked. But Clint noticed his face turning a paler color.

"This." Clint pulled the strip of tin from his pocket. He saw the man's eyes widen. Then he told the story, and from the expression on Miller's face as he went along he knew that he had guessed rightly. He told all that had happened since he'd come into the Panhandle, even about Sadie McGowan and the safe. He told about how Annette Cober had come to find that Fred Cober was not her father. And he wound up by telling how he had found the seal from a box of government rifles in Miller's toolshed and about the Comanche raid that had followed.

When Clint had finished, Miller sat on the log, staring helplessly at his wife. His face was pale, his lower jaw was trembling uncontrollably and he was wringing his hands like a woman.

His wife was backing away from him as though he were some evil thing. Then she stopped and looked at him. The pity in her voice was mingled with contempt. "You've made a fine name for your children to look forward to," she sobbed. "Now I know why Jake Martin looked so puzzled the day he came to help you bury a dead horse. Now I know why that toolbox you said you'd picked up in town was so heavy when you brought it home. Yes, I know a lot of things now." She broke down then and her thin body was wracked with sobs. The children stood silently beyond the firelight, watching with awe in their tiny faces. "Oh, Nile!" she sobbed at last. "How could you do it? We could have been so happy out here—the country and everything. And you had to . . ." She couldn't go any farther but collapsed in a heap on the ground, sobbing uncontrollably.

Clint bent over her and helped her to a sitting position. He wanted to say something to comfort her, but he felt

awkward when he tried to find the words. Miller just sat there, wringing his hands and staring into the fire. Clint knew the man was more weak than bad, and he couldn't help but feel sorry for him, much as he hated weakness.

"Call the kids to supper, ma'am," Clint said gently. "They don't need to know anything about this yet. We'll move back up to the Canadian in the morning. Nobody's been killed on account of what your husband's done, though they might have been. All we want him to do is to tell what's been going on so that the little ranchers will know just what kind of a man this Cober is. It might be a good lesson to your husband. After he's settled with those people for the property that was burned he'll most likely be free to go, on account of his family. When that happens, you folks can go on back to Louisiana."

"Nile—he was so happy back there," she said, trying to quiet her sobs. "Out here—I don't know, he's changed so. He's been scared one minute, then cocky the next. I'd been worried about it, but I never dreamed it was anything like this."

They agreed among themselves to start back the next morning. Mal and Clint decided it wouldn't be good to tie Miller so that he couldn't get away. Not with his kids watching. So they took turns standing guard that night.

But when dawn came they knew they'd never take Nile Miller anywhere: Neither Clint nor Mal knew exactly when it happened. Sometime during the night he'd huddled in his blanket beside the fire, pretending to be asleep, and he'd slipped a penknife from his pocket and slashed his wrists.

They buried him shortly after sunrise, on a little knoll overlooking the Red River. They told his children that a rattler had bit him in the night. That way maybe they could forget him more easily.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IT WAS a sad trip Clint and Mal had to make with Miller's widow to the little settlement of Childress which lay beyond the south bank of the Red River. There they helped her sell the wagon and other holdings, and arranged for her and the kids to take a stage that made connections with the railroad at Dallas.

When the last detail had been disposed of, Mrs. Miller took Clint and Mal aside where the children couldn't hear. "I'm grateful to both of you for what you've done to help. It might sound funny that I should be, because if you hadn't come along Nile might still be alive. But it's best the way it happened, I guess. If he'd kept on like that no tellin' what disgrace he might have brought to his family." She paused for a minute, and Clint was afraid she might be going to cry again. But she braced herself and went on. "This way, the young'uns will never have to know the kind of man their daddy was. He wasn't really bad, though. Just weak."

Clint felt slightly embarrassed to be hearing thanks from her under the circumstances. He wasn't very good with words at a time like this. "If you might need any money for the trip, Mrs. Miller . . ."

"No," she said quickly, with a little shake of her head. "Nile got almost ten thousand dollars from Cober for the place."

Clint found it hard not to look at Mal when she said that, but he didn't bat an eyelash. The ten thousand, he knew, was far more than Cober would have paid for the land alone. But this woman had been punished enough for her husband's weakness. Let her keep the money, he thought. It would help her and the kids. And that would be the first time, Clint guessed, that Cober's money had ever done any good for anybody.

The woman paused for a long time, and Clint felt there was something more she wanted to say. He waited, rolling a cigarette, knowing she'd say it when she was ready. She did. Her voice was hesitant.

"There's something Nile gave me once," she said, unsure that she should be saying it. "It was some papers he'd sealed in an envelope. He said it had to do with some business between him and Cober, and that if anything ever happened to him I was to open it."

She opened the carpetbag she carried and drew out a crumpled brown envelope. She held it out to Clint. "Here," she said, "I know all I want to about what went on back there. If there's anything in here about Cober, maybe you can use it. All I want to do is forget."

Clint took the envelope she offered him, turning it over slowly in his hand. Miller's death had cheated him out of the answers to a lot of questions he'd had. Maybe this would give him some of the answers. He didn't thank her for it. That seemed to him unnecessary under the circumstances. Besides, how could you thank a woman for something when you knew it might be the proof that her husband was even worse than she knew?

Clint and Mal Turpin waited until the eastbound stage left, taking the Miller family with it. Then they mounted and started back north for the Canadian.

"What do you reckon is in that envelope?" Mal asked when they were out of the settlement.

"I don't have any idea," Clint told him. "When we get north of Red River we'll stop and open it up."

They dismounted in a growth of willows, not far from where Nile Miller lay buried. Mal sat down in the shade and rolled a cigarette. Clint squatted beside him and tore at the flap with unsteady fingers.

There were several papers inside, covered with a scrawled handwriting in ink. Clint began to read silently, and his face took a grim set as he read. When he had finished the first page he handed it to Mal. "Here, read this," he said.

Mal grinned sheepishly. "'Fraid I'll have to take your word for what's in it, Clint. I can't read!"

"Then I might as well read the rest of it and tell you the

whole thing when I've finished." He read the papers slowly, one by one, while Mal smoked in silence, watching Clint's face. At last Clint laid aside the papers, reaching in his shirt for tobacco.

"The first part," he began, "was written by Miller. It tells how Cober made the proposition to pay Miller for spying on the other ranchers and to try to scare them into selling to Cober. Miller wrote it all down because he didn't trust Cober, and wanted his wife to know what Cober had done in case Miller turned up missing."

Clint paused to touch a match to his smoke. "Cober wanted him to do something else, too. Seems he'd found out that the Langer brothers and Ed Bartow had put Cober in a bind by writing down something they knew about Cober and caching it someplace. Cober wanted Miller to find it, someway, and bring it to him. Miller took to spying on the Langers and Bartow. He found out they went to Sadie McGowan's pretty regular. That seemed funny to him since Sadie didn't seem to be particularly friendly with any of them."

Mal asked, "That's what was in the safe Sadie had?"

Clint nodded. "Miller looked in through a window one night and saw Bartow open the closet and look at the safe to make sure it hadn't been opened. Having been a locksmith once, back in Louisiana, Miller didn't have any trouble getting into the safe. He hung around one day until Sadie went down on the river to look for hay. Then he busted in and opened the safe and took the papers."

"What did he do with them?" Mal wanted to know.

Clint pointed to the pile beside him. "They're here, with the rest of them. Miller found them interesting enough to keep himself. It was just one more protection against Cober crossing him up. He told Cober he had the papers where they could be found in case something happened to him—Miller, that is. Then Miller used that as a lever to get Cober to pay him a better price for the work he did for Cober."

"Miller sure took a chance, doin' Cober thataway," Mal put in.

"Not much," Clint told him. "I guess Cober figured he'd rather Miller had the papers than the Langers and Bartow."

And I don't guess he was too worried about Miller making much use of what he knew. It would have been too easy to get at Miller through his wife and kids. Cober probably counted on getting the papers back from Miller after Miller had served his purpose."

"What was on those papers? The ones in Sadie's safe, I mean."

Clint picked up the papers from the ground, leafing through them to refresh his memory. "It tells here," he said slowly, "how the Langers and Bartow met a man by the name of Arch Ring. They met him in a saloon in San Antone when they'd gone down to buy some cattle for Cober. This Ring looked like a dead ringer for Cober. It was then that they hatched the plan to have Ring kill Cober and take his place. Ring's payment was to be five thousand dollars, plus a share of the profits from the Double O."

Mal nodded solemnly. "So it's just like you figgered it was, huh, Clint?"

"I had a hunch something like that had happened. Of course, they sent Ring up to Wyomin' after Cober had been done away with. That was to give folks around Desperado City time to forget just exactly what Fred Cober looked like. Enough, anyhow, that Ring could pass for Cober without any questions being asked. Ring was already using Cober's name when I first ran across him up there."

"How does the Cober gal fit into all this, Clint? Seems to me they'd have been better off to have left her back East. 'Stead of that, I hear they sent for her—at least this Ring said he did."

"These papers don't say anything about that," Clint told him. "The only reason the Langers and Bartow drew these up and signed them was to have something to hold over Ring's head. The main thing they wanted to have down was who killed Fred Cober. But I guess Stub Langer got the idea that he might get the girl out here and marry her. That would make the Double O legally his."

"Well I'll be damned!" Mal swore, almost reverently. "They're sure a slick bunch. Slick as snakes."

Clint ground his cigarette under his bootheel and stood

up. "We'd better ride, Mal. Something might've happened up there while we've been away."

When they had mounted Mal asked Clint, "What's our first move when we get back—show these papers to Pete Wieborn and the rest to prove what's happened?"

Clint studied the question for a while before he answered. "I guess that's the best thing to do, Mal. But a lot depends on what might have happened since we've been gone. Four days would give the Double O crowd a lot of time to act."

"What do you reckon they might have done, Clint?"

"Hard to tell, exactly. The Langers know Sadie and me took the safe. They'd most likely figure it has been opened by now and the papers read. Then, again, they might think we hadn't had time to bust it open before the Comanche raid. That would probably make them think the papers had burned inside the safe from the heat. The best thing they could do, it seems to me, would be to sit still and see what happens."

"What about them finding Miller gone?" Mal asked. "Don't you reckon they might follow him?"

Clint shook his head. "The Langers didn't know Miller had the papers. Ring would figure it was a good thing to have the man out of the way. The threat hanging over his head would be gone with those papers. Both Ring and the Langers would feel that it might help scare the other ranchers out of the valley, having one man leave like that. I don't know. It's hard to say."

They rode along in silence for a long while, each busy with his own thoughts. At last Mal broke the silence. "What would happen, Clint, if this Ring said it was all a lie that the Langers had cooked up to try to get rid of him?"

"You mean, if he insisted that he was Fred Cober?"

"That's right."

"In those papers it tells where Fred Cober was buried. If we had to, we could dig up the body."

They made camp for the night when dusk overtook them. As they were spreading out their bedrolls for the night, Clint noticed that Mal seemed restless. "What's the matter, Mal? You seem uneasy about something."

"I'm uneasy alright, Clint. I've just been thinkin', supposin' this fella Ring goes nosin' around across the river to see what damage the Comanches done. Say, for instance, that he's still actin' like he's Fred Cober and he goes to Pete Wieborn's to find his daughter. Pete'd have no reason not to tell him we'd taken the two women away and had set out to find Miller. He might get to thinkin' about them papers and what would happen if we found them."

"You think he might come after us?" Clint asked skeptically.

Mal gave a dissenting shake of his head. "Not him. The Langers would be sure to follow. But Ring has got a bunch of tough hands workin' for him. For a couple of hundred dollars two or three of them could be persuaded to trail us down and bushwhack us, and no questions asked!"

Clint grew thoughtful as he finished laying out his bedroll. What Mal had said made some sense. Of course there was just a slim chance that Ring might have done just that. But . . .

"Let's stuff these bedrolls full of bunchgrass, Mal," he said finally. "Make it look like we're in them. We can take a blanket and sleep over there in those junipers. One of us can sleep while the other stands guard. You might be wrong, but on the other hand, I'd rather sleep only half a night than to get shot lying here."

They built up the fire to last a long time and picketed the horses close in where they couldn't be driven off without their seeing whoever tried it. Then they took blankets and their saddle guns and bedded down among the junipers. Clint said he wasn't sleepy just yet, so he took the first turn at guard. Mal pulled his blanket around him and was asleep almost as soon as he'd closed his eyes.

The stars came out by the thousands overhead, and Clint found that he could see the outlines of the surrounding terrain. Time dragged slowly. Somewhere out on the rolling plains a coyote sent its mournful wail quavering through the stillness of the night. Clint shivered involuntarily. Not because he was scared, but because of the cry itself. He guessed there had never been a time when he'd been alone under the vast canopy of night that the first cry of a coyote didn't

make him shiver. There was a plaintive lonesomeness about the sound that stirred something deep within him. Maybe it was because he'd always been lonesome himself, after his folks had died when he was sixteen. There had been times on nightherd when Clint had thought about his father and mother, and always, it seemed, there'd been the mournful cry of a coyote to help the feeling of lonesomeness along.

The feeling had left him when he'd married. Then this man who called himself Cober had come along . . . Clint had never felt more lonesome in his life than during those two years he had stayed on, alone, in the valley of Wind River. The lonesomeness had been replaced by hatred and the desire for revenge when the word had finally come that this man called Cober was in the Texas Panhandle.

Tonight, Clint realized, was the first time the lonesome feeling had come back since he'd left Wyoming. He thought of Annette Cober, then, and he knew why. He knew why he'd shivered at the sound of the coyote. There was a kinship between the three of them. The coyote, Annette, and himself. All were lonesome in a different way. The coyote because he was driven, hunted, despised. The girl, Clint knew, because her world had collapsed around her. She had, Clint felt, come to trust him in her lonely confusion. Maybe she had even come to like him for what he was. Even that had been taken from her when she had come upon him and Sadie that night and had seen Sadie clinging to him. Clint felt the strong desire to be with her now. To explain what he felt for both of them.

He found his eyes growing heavy and he reached out a hand and shook the sleeping form beside him.

"What's up?" Mal asked quickly, immediately awake.

"Everything's peaceful," Clint told him. "It's your turn to try staying awake for a while."

Then he laid his rifle beside him, mumbled goodnight, and pulled the blanket over him. Sleep closed over him and the hard ground became a feather bed.

Clint was awakened by Mal's hand on his shoulder, shaking vigorously. The redhead placed a warning finger over

Clint's mouth and Clint nodded to show he understood. He sat up, pulling his rifle after him.

When his eyes had adjusted he saw Mal pointing up a draw across the slope. Clint strained into the starlight, and for some time he saw nothing. Then he caught a faint movement, along the edge of the draw. A patch, darker than the ground behind it, had moved. As he watched, another moved beside it, not far away. Two men were creeping down the draw in the direction of the embers of their fire. Clint felt suddenly glad that he and Mal had decided against sleeping in their own bedrolls this night.

The men spread out a little when they left the draw, coming stealthily across the slope. Apparently they had left their horses at some distance, for there had been no warning whinny.

On they came, till they were standing almost together looking down on the bulging bedrolls. Clint could see them plainly now, but he couldn't make out their faces. He saw them look at each other for an instant, then nod. They were telling each other that they had found the right men. Together they pulled their guns, aimed them at where a sleeping rider would normally lay his head.

The noise of the shots rang loud in the night, and the echoes reverberated out across the rolling hills. The sleeping horses jumped skittishly, pulling hard at their picket ropes. Together, the gunmen bent down and pulled aside the ponchos. Clint heard the first faint cry of surprise as the men found they had been tricked. He leveled his Winchester and shouted, "Alright, boys—drop those guns!"

For an answer he saw two orange jets spurt in the darkness, heard the slugs clip the juniper twigs above him. Calmly, deliberately, he lined his sights and squeezed the trigger.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE SHARP CRACK of Clint's Winchester was immediately echoed as Mal Turpin fired from beside him. At that short distance they couldn't miss. The two attackers jerked grotesquely as the shots struck them, then crumpled slowly to the ground. Levering a new cartridge into the chamber, Clint left the shelter of the junipers and edged cautiously forward. Mal followed him.

Clint struck a match and bent over the still forms sprawled, ironically, across the bedrolls of the men they had come to kill.

"I don't recognize either of them," Clint told Mal.

The redhead leaned closer for a better look. "I've seen 'em both before. Double O riders. That one by you is Sneed Denver. This one I think they call Lobo Wolfe. Neither one of 'em will be missed much by decent folks."

Clint raised his head and looked around him. The grey streak in the east told him it would be daylight soon. "What will we do with these two?" he asked Mal. "We haven't got a shovel."

"We ought to leave them here for the buzzards," Mal said grimly. "That's what they'd have done with us most likely. But I reckon we can find enough loose gravel in the draw over there to cover 'em with."

Daylight had come by the time they had finished their distasteful chore. They broke camp and rode up the draw in the direction the attackers had come, looking for the gunmen's mounts. A quarter of a mile away they found them, hidden in a narrow canyon.

"They look like good horses," Mal commented. "What'll we do, unsaddle 'em and turn 'em loose?"

Clint looked the horses over. "By right they belong to

Annette Cober. Maybe we'd better take them back with us. It'll slow us down a little, but not enough to matter."

It was just past noon when the two of them, covered with sweat and dust, rode into Desperado City. Clint led the way straight for Sadie's livery stable across from the hotel. "We'll leave the Double O mounts here for now," he said to Mal as they got down.

They heard footsteps behind them and turned to see who it was. Art Dunlop was crossing the street toward them. "I'm mighty glad to see you two boys," Art said as he came up.

"What's the matter, Art?" Clint asked. "Trouble?"

The old man wrinkled his brow. "Not exactly. But the Langer brothers have been hangin' around all mornin' askin' questions."

"What kind of questions?" Clint wanted to know.

"They asked me if I'd seen you. 'Course I told 'em I didn't pay no mind to where you went. But they started gettin' curious as to where you might've taken the Cober gal. I been gettin' worried, Clint. Those hombres are up to no good."

"Speak of the devil!" Clint said in a low voice. "Here he comes now—with his brother."

Art and Mal both turned to see who it was. Cal and Stub Langer were walking slowly toward them.

"I'm lookin' for the Cober girl, Driskill. Her daddy wants her home," Stub Langer said.

"First time I knew a dead man could talk," Clint said, his voice edged with steel. He saw the Langers exchange uneasy glances, then look uncertainly at Art Dunlop. They decided it was time to change the conversation.

"Alright, Driskill," Cal Langer snarled. "Have your joke. But I happened to see you two ride into town just now leadin' a couple of Double O saddle animals. Bein's we work for the Double O, we're mighty curious as to how you come to have 'em."

"It don't pay to get too curious, Cal," Clint said evenly. "Remember, that's what killed the cat."

If the Langers caught the threat in his words they chose to ignore it. Stub turned to his brother. "Looks to me, Cal, like an out and out case of horse thievery."

"It sure does," Cal agreed with a sneering smile. "Pity there ain't no law hereabouts to turn these men over to. Reckon we'll just have to handle this ourselves. Down here, Driskill, we hang horse thieves on sight."

"Any time you two feel you're ready to take us with you, just give it a try," Clint challenged.

To his surprise, both Langers accepted the challenge, their right hands moving swiftly toward their holsters. Clint's own right hand moved like lightning, then stopped suddenly as something hit him hard on the head from behind. He felt his knees buckle, half-saw the grin on the two faces before him, half-heard Mal Turpin groan as he, too, was struck. Then blackness closed in.

When Clint regained consciousness he was aware of a babble of voices around him. He was able to tell he was seated on a horse with his hands tied behind him. His vision cleared and he saw he was in the saddle of one of the Double O mounts he and Mal had brought back. Then he heard someone say, "Hell, why not hang 'em here?"

He looked at the faces pressing in around them and turned to glance at Mal. The redhead was staring groggily at the crowd, still unsure of what had happened. Clint noticed two other riders besides the Langers. Probably, he thought, the two who sneaked up behind them just as the Langers had gone for their guns.

"I know how you men feel," Stub Langer was saying, "but since these are Fred Cober's horses they stole, I reckon it'll be up to him to decide what to do with them."

Clint knew that Stub's refusal to let them be hung on the spot was not born of any concern for propriety. The Double O riders wanted to get Clint and his companion out of town in order to extract certain information from them. The murmur of voices greeting Stub's decision told of the disappointment of the crowd.

Clint's eyes rested on a familiar face on the outer fringe of the crowd. Art Dunlop, scared to death at what was happening, but too loyal to abandon his friends in spite of the danger to himself. Clint searched his mind frantically, trying to think of some way to let Art know about the papers in his bedroll. He called casually to him, "Art, I picked up that

special chewing tobacco you asked for. It's in my war sack on behind the roan."

The old man stared at him for a second, then nodded his head. His weakly mumbled "thanks" could scarcely be heard above the noise of the crowd. But Clint knew Art had understood. And he knew that Art would have presence of mind enough to take the papers to the ranchers across the river as soon as he found what they were.

"What about that, Cal?" Stub asked his brother. "Do you think we ought to leave their horses here?"

Clint's heart sank. If the Langers took the roan along they'd take the only proof away with them. Even if Art Dunlop took it upon himself to go to the other ranchers, they would probably figure, not knowing the truth, that Clint and Mal had got what they had coming to them.

"Naw, they won't need horses where they're goin'," Cal said pointedly.

There was a laugh from the crowd. Despite the implication of Cal's remark, Clint gave a gentle sigh of relief. At least if the information got across the river Ring would get what he had coming to *him*. And the Langers, too, for that matter. And it might happen in time to save him and Mal Turpin from what he felt was in store for them at the Double O.

They rode out of town to the accompaniment of disappointed shouts from the crowd, urging the Langers to see that they hung. The two strange Double O men rode in front and the Langers rode behind. Clint and Mal Turpin were in the middle.

The jogging gait caused Clint's head to ache. So much so that he found it almost impossible to try to think of some way out of the predicament.

When they were clear of the town Stub Langer rode up beside Clint. "Where'd you get these horses?" he demanded.

Clint looked at him contemptuously for a minute. Then the germ of an idea began to form in his mind. It was a long shot, but then he and Mal were in no position to be choosy. He remembered that the Langers wouldn't have known that Ring had sent the two killers south to meet them. And

he remembered why—Ring wanted to get the papers back so that the Langers' written statement could be destroyed. Then there would be only the Langers themselves to tell who had killed Fred Cober. And, Clint guessed, the way things had started to turn against the Double O, Ring would want to make sure the Langers wouldn't be around to talk.

Yes, if he played it right . . .

"Why, we got these horses from a couple of Double O men who tried to drygulch us last night," he told Stub.

Stub's eyes narrowed. "You're a damn liar!" he said, but Clint thought he could detect a note of uncertainty in the man's voice.

Clint shrugged his shoulders and turned away. Cal had ridden up beside his brother in time to hear what Clint had said. Now he was looking closely at the horses in question. "Say, Stub," he asked, "ain't that Sneed Denver's saddle? And that other one looks to me like the one Wolfe used to ride."

Stub looked closely at the saddles for a minute, shifting his eyes from one to the other and back again. "By damn! You're right, Cal! How do you suppose . . . ?" He stopped and looked questioningly at Clint. "If somebody tried to drygulch you," he asked uncertainly, "how come you bothered to bring their horses back with you?"

Clint told him the truth. "They belong to Annette Cober, don't they? Well, we brought them back for her."

Stub said sharply, "Those horses belong to *Fred* Cober you mean."

Clint looked at him for a full minute. It was a look that was loaded with contempt, a look calculated to rile Stub as much as possible. "Like I told you before," Clint said slowly, "they belong to Annette Cober. Fred Cober's dead."

Clint noticed that the two strange Double O men were listening now. The Langers noticed it, too. Apparently the killing of Fred Cober was a well-kept secret. Stub forced a laugh. "Hell, Driskill, you can't kid us. We left Fred Cober just this mornin' at the ranch."

Clint said nothing, knowing that they wouldn't press him further with the other two listening. He turned his head

away from the Langers and winked at Mal Turpin. The red-head's expression changed ever so slightly, just enough to let Clint know he knew.

The Langers fell back just out of earshot. Clint looked around once, saw them arguing earnestly with one another. He turned away with a smile. They were wondering, now, just how much he knew. They would know, undoubtedly, that Annette would have told him what she'd overheard that day. That would be enough to convince them that Clint had reason to believe Fred Cober was dead. Yet they couldn't afford to have it told in front of the other two riders.

And, he felt sure, they were wondering if maybe Arch Ring hadn't found out that Clint knew a little more than that. The fact that he would send killers after him and Mal Turpin would make them think that. He wondered if they knew that the safe had been empty when it was opened. There would be a few more questions asked, he figured, before they reached the Double O.

He figured rightly. Stub Langer rode up beside the other two Double O men and said, "You two fellows ride on ahead and tell the boss what's happened. Cal and me want to stop here and see if we can't get these two hombres to tell what happened to the men who belonged to these horses."

Stub and Cal each took a lead rope from the other riders and watched them ride off. Then Stub handed his rope to Cal. "Hold this, Cal. I'm goin' to ask Driskill a few questions."

Clint was wondering, as Stub rode up to him, what Ring would think when the other two riders reached the Double O with their story. It made him smile. Ring would be beside himself trying to figure out if Clint and Mal Turpin had found Miller or not. And if they had, he'd be wondering if the Langers had got back the papers they wanted. Clint decided it would be best not to tell the Langers any more than was necessary to keep their curiosity aroused.

"I suppose," Stub began, smiling faintly, "that you been listenin' to Annette Cober's loco talk about Fred not bein' her father."

"I suppose," Clint said blankly. He would let Stub do most of the talking. Also, most of the guessing.

"You know that's a lie, Driskill. I don't know whether she told you or not, but her dad wanted her to marry me. She didn't want to, so when he tried to make her go through with it she sort of went out of her mind and got this crazy notion of tellin' people he wasn't her daddy so that she wouldn't have to come back and marry me."

"You're a damn poor liar, Stub," Clint said evenly. Then he added slowly, "And so is Arch Ring."

The effect on the Langers was instant. At the mention of of Ring's name they jumped like they'd been slapped. "Where'd you get that name?" Stub snapped at him.

Clint tried to appear as nonchalant as he could with his hands tied behind him. "You know, Stub, sometimes I think you're just plain dumb."

Stub's face reddened. His hand moved to his gun. "I ought to kill you for that!" he snarled.

"You won't though," Clint said with an assurance he did not feel. "Because if you did there'd be nobody left to show you just how much wool this man Ring has been pulling over your eyes. Besides, you two have come through this pretty clean so far. Ring is the only one anybody could pin a killing on, up to now."

Cal broke in earnestly, fear evident in his voice. "Dammit, Stub, he's right! Let's get the hell out of this country and let Ring have this damn range. When them nesters get through with him all he'll be able to use it for will be his own grave!"

Stub thought that over for a while. "You're right, Cal. Nobody could prove we had anythin' to do with it. Ring looks enough like Cober that we could say we didn't know the difference. Besides, there was that three years away."

Cal looked at Clint. "But this man, and Turpin, too—they know we was in on it. We didn't kill nobody, but . . ."

Clint shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't see anybody killed. It'd be my word against yours as to whether you were in on it or not. Ring is the man who's in the hole. Besides, he's the man I came down here to get in the first place."

"That's no argument," Cal said viciously. "Stub, I tell you this man and his redheaded friend know too damn much. Let's put a bullet through them right here. Nobody'd

ever be able to prove that we did it. They'd think it was Ring, since Driskill was after him anyhow."

Clint was thinking fast. He hadn't counted on this. "There's one thing you boys seem to have forgotten," he said as calmly as he could. "Those papers that were in that safe. You probably think they got burned up in that Comanche raid. Well, they didn't. I've left them in a safe place with instructions for them to be opened in case anything happens to me." Well, he told himself, that was pretty close to the truth. "Writing all that down," he went on, "was a pretty good way to keep Ring from crossing you up. But when all this other business started those papers could do you as much harm as they could him."

Stub said, "I think he's lyin', Cal."

"How else would I know all about what I just told you unless I'd seen those papers? And how do you think Miller was so sure of where he stood with Cober if he didn't have them?"

"Miller?" the Langers chorused.

Clint nodded. "He stole the papers out of Sadie McGowan's safe. Me and Mal went after Miller to find out who was responsible for the Comanche raid. When we caught up with him he killed himself. His widow gave us the papers. Ring tried to cross you two up there. He must've figured we'd get the papers from Miller. That's why he sent Sneed Denver and Lobo Wolfe to bushwhack us, so's he could get the papers back and have you two over a barrel."

Stub swore. "I'll be damned!"

"Come on, Stub," Cal pleaded. "Let's go on back to the ranch. We'll pretend we don't know nothin' about what's goin' on. There's about twenty-five thousand dollars in the safe that's at the ranch now. Let's take that when Ring ain't around, and then we'll get the hell out of this country."

"What about these two?" Stub asked dubiously.

Cal grinned evilly. "What makes you think Ring won't want to get rid of them? Smarten up, Stub. Let him do all the dirty work."

Stub nodded. "You're right. Let's get goin'. All of a sudden I got a hankerin' to be in some other territory."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WHEN THEY had started again for the Double O headquarters, Stub Langer called back over his shoulder, "Remember, Driskill, as far as you know Ring's name is Fred Cober. That's what he goes by, except to me and Cal here when we're alone. After we've pulled out, what you call him is your own funeral."

Clint nodded in agreement. But in his own mind he was wondering if Ring mightn't have made some plans of his own by now. Especially when the two riders who had gone on ahead would tell what had happened to Denver and Wolfe.

They followed the same trail Clint had ridden the day he had dodged the ambush Ed Bartow had laid for him. When they topped the rise that looked down on the rambling buildings of the Double O, Clint felt a tightening in his throat. Before long now, he would be face to face with the man he'd come here to kill. But it wouldn't be like he'd planned it. He'd planned to corner the man alone, to show him the cow he'd brought with him from Wyoming. Instead he was being brought to him with his hands tied behind his back.

They rode across the flat and through the trees surrounding the main ranchhouse. Clint looked about him and he understood Sadie McGowan's disappointment. The place had obviously been built with a woman in mind.

But Fred Cober had built too well. Men of avarice and greed had seen the opportunity to be had and had taken it. Clint had been taught at his mother's knee from the Good Book that there would come a day of reckoning for men the breed of Ring and the Langers. Clint wondered if it mightn't be close at hand.

As they dismounted at the front gate, the two riders who had gone ahead came striding across the yard. "Cober inside?" Stub asked them, nodding toward the house.

One of the men shook his head. "We told him what you told us to. It upset him a little bit for some reason. He asked a lot of questions that we couldn't answer, then he told us to go set in the bunkhouse. After a while we seen him come out carrying a set of saddlebags. He threw them on a horse and took off without sayin' . . ."

The Langers exchanged hurried glances, then Stub cut in. "Which way did he go?"

The rider screwed up his face and answered, "That's the funny part about it. He lit out like he was headed for town. We thought maybe he'd gone to meet you. Then we happened to catch a glimpse of him cuttin' across the ridge and headin' southwest."

Cal Langer started to swear, "Why the lousy son of a . . ."

"Shut up!" Stub roared at him, then turned to the two riders. "Anybody else around?"

"Only the cook. The rest of the boys is tryin' to move that bunch of yearlin's someplace where there's grass. Cober's got more cattle than he has grass to run 'em on. If he don't get more land pretty soon . . ."

Stub cut in again. "You and Slim ride out and give the boys a hand. Cal and me will be along later."

Clint looked at Mal Turpin. The redhead shrugged his shoulders and looked away as Stub spoke to them. "Get inside, you two, and be quick about it." But both Langers ran up the porch steps ahead of them. By the time Clint and Mal reached the door they could hear angry mutterings from inside.

They walked into a room that held a desk and a safe, plus a few rawhide covered chairs. Papers were scattered about the floor in wild profusion. Stub Langer jerked open the door of the safe as they came in. "It's gone!" he raged, his face turning purple with anger. "He took every goddam cent and ran out on us." He turned and ran for the door.

"Wait a minute!" Cal stopped him. "What about these

two? You gonna be dumb enough to leave 'em here to tell where we went and why?"

Stub looked from Clint to Mal then back again. An evil grin spread over his face. "You're right again, Cal. Sometimes you show signs of even havin' brains." His right hand slid to the butt of his .45 and he drew the gun from its holster.

Cal stepped up beside him and put a restraining hand on his wrist. "Hold it, Stub! Ring is gone. Those two men you sent off seen him go. If it hadn't been for your doin' that we could've gunned these two and made it look like Ring did it. Then we could've shut the mouths of the only two men who saw him go. This way those two will be sure to tell what they know to save their own hides. I've got a better idea."

"Then let's hear it. We ain't got all day!"

"We can make it look like an accident," Cal said with unholy glee. "We can shove 'em in the back storeroom, the one that ain't got no windows. Then all we gotta do is spill a little coal oil around and touch a match to it. See what I mean?"

"I sure do. Then whoever comes lookin' for these two will think maybe they set it on fire themselves tryin' to get out. We can bust a lamp on the floor of the storeroom to make it look like it started thataway."

Cal gave Clint a shove. "Move, Driskill! Me and Stub got a lot of work to do."

Clint thought of trying to fight their way out, even with their hands tied behind them like they were. He looked at Mal Turpin and saw the same idea reflected in his eyes. But something occurred to him to change his mind. While the Langers wanted to get them inside the storeroom alive, which meant they wouldn't shoot if Clint started something, it would only take one blow from a pistol butt to do the trick. And Clint didn't relish the idea of lying there unconscious while the Langers touched a match to the coal oil.

He looked at Mal again and shook his head. The redhead looked disappointed, but followed without a word. Clint was thinking that the sharp glass from the broken lamp might give them a chance to saw through the ropes that

held their hands. With their hands free they might have a chance.

The storeroom was dark inside, except for the faint light that came through the open door. It was empty, Clint saw, save for a table and an odd piece of furniture or two.

"Sit down against the wall, you two," Stub ordered. They did as they were told. Cal Langer came in carrying a coal oil lamp.

"Set it here, on the edge of the table," Stub told him. When the lamp was in place, Stub stepped back and drew his gun. "Y'know, Cal, I've always wanted to bust a lamp, just for the hell of it." With that he swung the .45 by its barrel and sent glass and coal oil showering over the two crouched against the far wall.

"You damn near hit it too hard," Cal protested. "There won't be enough left of it for anybody to find."

"Yes there will," Stub said peevishly. "Now bring in a couple of jugs from the kitchen. Go around the back way so's the Chink won't catch on. Tell him you want to fill the lamps in the bunkhouse or something if he sees you."

When Cal had gone, Clint tried to stall for time. "You don't figure you'll get away with this, do you, Stub?"

Stub sat on the edge of the table and began rolling a cigarette. "This is one time, Driskill," he grinned, "that you won't be able to talk your way out. If you think I'm worryin' about them papers . . ." He shrugged his shoulders, "They won't prove nothin' except that Ring killed Fred Cober. If anybody wants to bother to come after me and Cal because we put Ring up to it—well, let 'em try and find us."

Cal came back carrying two jugs of coal oil. "This ought to be enough, Stub."

Stub stood up. "Alright. Start pourin' it around the floor here and out in the hall. Meantime, I'm gonna make sure these two don't try to saw through those ropes with the glass from that busted lamp."

Clint felt his heart sink in his boots as he watched Stub Langer walk toward Mal. Stub had his gun out, holding it by the barrel again. He stood over the redhead, then suddenly swung downward viciously. There was a sickening thud and Mal Turpin slumped forward and lay still.

Clint tried to dodge when his turn came. The butt of the gun struck his head a glancing painful blow, and he struggled to hold on to consciousness. He fell forward, feigning unconsciousness, trying desperately not to cry out from the pain in his head.

Dimly, he heard Cal Langer say, "I don't think you hit him square, Stub. Better hit him again to make sure."

This time there was no dodging. He felt the weight of the butt against the base of his skull. Then he was slipping away into a deep, black pool where nothing mattered anymore.

When Clint and Mal Turpin had ridden out of town with their hands tied and in the company of four Double O riders, Art Dunlop stood looking after them. As soon as the crowd of men began to break up, the little hotel proprietor sauntered across the street to Sadie's livery stable. Inside the door he turned casually, made sure no one was looking, then untied the bedroll from behind Clint's saddle. He knew full well Clint had left his war sack in his room. That let him know that something was here that Clint wanted him to find. That, plus the fact that he didn't chew tobacco.

The papers were just as Clint had left them that morning when he'd rolled his bed. Art began to leaf through them. As he read, his eyes widened. Hurriedly he leafed through the remaining pages, then he glanced up.

"Well whaddya know?" he asked of no one in particular. Then he stuffed the papers inside his shirt and ran across the street to the hotel. Annette Cober was standing in the lobby.

"What're you doin' out of your room?" he demanded. "Clint said you was supposed to stay there until . . ."

She laid an anxious hand on his arm. "I saw them, Mr. Dunlop. I couldn't help it, I was watching from the window upstairs. From Clint's room. I got tired of staying in that same room of ours all the time. I saw those men take him and Mal Turpin away. They'll kill them, I know they will."

For an answer Art unbuttoned his shirt and took out the papers. "Read this," he said quietly. "But don't let anybody

see you. Here, get out of sight in the dining room. I'm goin' to tell Nancy where I'll be."

When Art returned to the dining room Annette was standing where he had left her. Sadie McGowan stood at her elbow, her eyes intent on the papers in Annette's hands. The Cober girl looked up and the old man saw there were tears in her eyes. He had forgotten that women were inclined to cry at times like that. "Now lookit here, you two!" he said with forced gruffness, swallowing the lump that had risen in his throat. "Clint said for you to stay in that room until he said different. Now you go do like I say!"

He took the papers from Annette, stuffing them back inside his shirt.

"Where are you going, Mr. Dunlop?" she asked.

He turned back from the doorway. "Across the river to see if this won't stir some of them folks off'n their backsides! Just because they wouldn't listen to Clint they got him into a peck of trouble—and themselves, too. Now, by Jingo, they're goin' to ride down to the Double O and settle this business, or else they'll answer to me why not!"

He stepped behind the desk long enough to pick up a sawed-off shotgun and then strode purposefully for the door. Several men leaning against the front of the hotel started, then turned to stare at each other. No one in Desperado City had ever seen white-haired Art Dunlop armed before. They watched him disappear inside the door of the livery. A minute later he came out with Clint's roan. He vaulted into the saddle with an ease that told he had done more than operate a frontier hotel in his sixty-four years. Balancing the shotgun on the pommel, he let the roan out down the street on a dead run.

It had been fifteen years, more or less, Art Dunlop recalled, since he had ridden a horse. Those fifteen years fell away, and more as well, as he pounded down the slope toward the broad ribbon of the Canadian. Instead of the bent-shouldered old hotel proprietor he became a lanky youth, riding eastward like the wind, spreading the news about a place called the Alamo. Art smiled at the memory as he plunged the roan into the water. He smiled again as he remembered a young lieutenant with another message,

"The captain's respects, General Taylor, Monterey has fallen!"

He lifted the roan to a run again as soon as they were clear of the water. He smiled again at the feel of the wind whipping his face. It had been a long time since he had carried an important message on horseback—but he guessed he hadn't forgotten how.

Jake Martin was lopping the branches from a tall cottonwood he had just felled. It was the start of a new house. He lifted his head quickly at the sound of galloping hoofs and reached for his rifle. His mouth fell open at the sight of the figure bent over the roan's neck, balancing a sawed-off shotgun on the horn.

"Well, if it ain't Art Dunlop! What brings you here?"

Art wasted little time with words. He pulled out the papers and handed them to Jake. "Where'd you get these?" Jake asked tersely, looking up.

"Clint Driskill, the man who's been tryin' to save you nesters' hides, took 'em off a man named Miller down on Red River! Cober's men have got Driskill and Turpin prisoner. What you gonna do about it?"

Jake looked up at the old eyes snapping fire down at him. Something rose in his throat and his voice was husky when he spoke again. "By God we're goin' to go after 'em, that's what!"

Jake picked up his rifle and swung aboard his horse. "You'd better get back to town, old-timer. There's some fast ridin' to be done!"

Art spat derisively at the ground. "Look, young feller. I was scoutin' the way for General Zack Taylor in Mexico afore you was out of three-cornered pants. I'm ridin' for Pete Wieborn's place. You go get Jeb Ash and his men. But keep to one side, sonny, you might get dust in your eyes!"

Pete Wieborn and his three riders were dragging charred timbers from inside the shell of the rock house when they saw the rider coming across the upslope. To a man they tensed, stood by their saddle guns.

When they saw who it was they walked out to meet him.

"Hotel business so bad you have to go drummin' up trade among folks who been burned out?" Pete grinned.

Art handed him the papers. The three riders crowded around at a signal from Pete. Then Art told them what had happened.

"Let's go, boys," Pete said abruptly. "If I hadn't been such a bull-headed fool, Driskill and Turpin wouldn't be in this fix." He turned to Art. "Much obliged, old-timer, for bringin' the news. There's chuck in the wagon over yonder, and a bed if you'd like to rest up a spell 'fore you go back."

Art turned the roan and waited patiently for the others to mount. "Last one to the river's a ring-tailed polecat!" he yelled as he slapped the roan with his heels. The others laughed, then frowned as they lashed their horses to try to keep up with him.

Jake Martin and Jeb Ash and another rider were waiting for them at the river. Double O territory lay beyond the opposite bank. Silently they nodded to each other, then plunged into the river in a body. They came dripping up the opposite bank, urged their laboring mounts up the steep slope. At their head rode an old man on a roan horse. There was fire deep in the watery old eyes, and a grim smile played at the corners of his mouth.

From the ridge they could see down into the valley of the Double O headquarters. What they saw made them draw rein suddenly and catch their breath.

"Somethin's happened already!" Art shouted, pointing into the valley.

Then they all loosed their reins and piled down the slope on each other's heels. When they reached the valley floor they began racing at breakneck speed toward where the house Fred Cober had built lay in a pile of ashes. The sun was sinking low in the west, and the smoke pall that hung above the valley was tinged a brilliant orange.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CLINT DRISKILL came awake slowly, conscious only of the dull aching mass that was his head. Vaguely, he groped in his mind to remember what had happened. Being clouted on the head with a heavy .45 twice in an afternoon would slow anybody's thinking. He tried to feel for the knot he knew must be at the base of his aching skull. Then he found he couldn't move his hands. They were tied behind him.

Something else entered his consciousness then. The smell of smoke, of burning wood mixed with coal oil reached his nostrils.

Coal oil?

The Langers! The storeroom, the broken lamp! It came back to him with a rush.

Clint staggered to his feet. The smoke was coming in at the crack under the door, stinging his eyes, making him cough.

"Mal!" he shouted. "Mal Turpin!"

He heard a groan from the floor beside him. Peering closely in the dim light from the finger of flame, he saw Mal Turpin. "Mal, can you hear me?" He got a groan for an answer.

Something crunched underfoot. Broken glass! He let himself gingerly to his knees, then sat down. His fingers touched the jagged edge of the lamp base. Feverishly he began working his hands up and down, drawing the rope across the sharp glass. The warm trickle of blood down his fingers told him he'd cut his wrist. His eyes were watering now from the smoke.

He felt his hands come free and stumbled over to where Mal Turpin was trying to struggle to a sitting position.

"Hold still, Mal. I'll untie you." His hands were numb and the knots were stubborn.

"Fire!" Mal said suddenly, his voice uncertain.

Clint pulled the ropes free, helped the redhead to his feet. "Come on. We've got to get out of here." He tried the door. It was locked. The crackling of flames in the hall was growing louder.

"Here, Mal. Help me pull a leg off this table. We can use it to batter the door down."

They heaved at the table leg, swaying it back and forth until it came loose. They were coughing violently. The smoke-laden air seared their lungs when they breathed. Together they grasped the heavy oaken table leg, rammed it against the door. Again and again they drove it home, each succeeding blow draining their precious remaining strength.

At last they dropped it to rest, gasping and coughing. "It's no damn use, Clint. That door is solid—three inches thick. We'll—we'll have to wait . . . till it burns . . . through. Then . . . try to run for it."

"Listen!" Clint put a hand on his arm.

There was a scraping sound, metallic. "In here!" Clint bellowed, then fell to coughing spasmodically.

They listened again. The smoke seemed to be diminishing. The crackling of flames gave way to a silent swishing. Then the smoke billowed in more strongly as they heard the hiss of water striking the hot timbers.

"Clint! Clint Driskill! Are you in there?"

"That sounded like Sadie McGowan!" Mal croaked.

"In here, Sadie! In the storeroom!" Clint gasped.

"Stand back, both of you—I'll try to blow the lock off!"

They scrambled for the cover of the wall, felt its heat against their bodies. "All right, Sadie—shoot!"

The roar of the shotgun met their ears. Sadie fired the other barrel and splinters flew across the room. "That did it!" Clint shouted. He grabbed the iron handle, pulled hard. The door creaked open.

The two riders stumbled out, expecting to gasp clean sweet air. They found more smoke and heard the crackling of flames again. Sadie, her face besmudged with soot and

grime, started toward the front of the building. "Let's get out of here! This place will cave in any minute!"

The flames had spread to the roof, lapping at the dry wood shingles. As they passed Fred Cober's office Clint ducked inside, kicked the lock off the gun case in the corner. Scooping up pistols and ammunition, he shoved them in his pockets, grabbed four rifles and made for the door.

Outside in the yard he breathed deeply of the fresh air. The stinging in his eyes stopped. He looked back at the blazing house, felt the heat of it against his face. Someone stood beside him and he turned to look.

It was Annette Cober. Her face, like Sadie's, was covered with grime. A lock of golden hair blew across her face. She lifted a hand and brushed it aside. Clint noticed the shovel with which she had smothered the coal oil flames. Another, the one Sadie had used, lay on the ground.

Clint tried to say something, but the words wouldn't come. Annette smiled up at him. "We thought we'd never find you," she said softly. "I—I was scared stiff. But Sadie kept telling me to shovel more dirt and bring another bucket of water from the pump. Then we heard you shout."

She stopped, and Clint noticed her eyes were moist. But not from the smoke fumes. He felt she wanted to say something else.

"How did you find out where we were?" he asked soberly.

"Art Dunlop. He told us what had happened. Sadie and I were watching from the hotel window and we saw the Langers take you away."

"You took an awful chance, coming here," Clint scolded her.

"We—we were afraid they might kill you two," she said, disturbed at the seeming harshness of his words. Clint turned away so that she wouldn't see the look that came into his eyes. Some other time, but not just right now.

"What about yourselves?" he muttered, loading one of the guns he'd taken.

"Why—I guess we didn't think about that. It just—well, it seemed like we ought to be doing something besides just sitting in that awful room, waiting."

Clint told her about the Langers and Ring. "Too bad about the house," he said when he'd finished.

Annette didn't say anything. She stood watching the flames leaping high, a resigned expression on her face. Clint wondered what she was thinking. Perhaps, he thought, she didn't care. She'd probably sell out as soon as she could and go back East where she belonged.

Mal Turpin came up leading the Double O mounts they'd ridden in on. Sadie was with him. Clint spoke to Mal, "They've got pretty much of a start on us, we'd better get going if we expect to catch them before they get to Ring."

"Listen!" Mal said suddenly. They listened. The pounding of hoofs came out of the southeast. As they turned to look they saw the riders top the crest of a rise not far away.

"The Double O crew!" Clint turned swiftly to Annette. "Did Art go for help across the river?"

Annette nodded. "Just as soon as you'd left," she said.

Clint pointed toward the bunkhouse. "Let's hole up there. Maybe we can hold these hombres off until the others get here."

They ran for the bunkhouse as the Double O riders swept down the slope toward them. "They're hoppin' mad!" Mal shouted as a bullet ricocheted behind them. "They probably think we killed Ring and the Langers and set fire to the place to get even."

Clint was the last one inside. As he slammed the heavy door behind him a spattering of shots struck the outside of the bunkhouse. "Just made it!" he said grimly. He wasn't worried about being able to stand off the men outside. Chances were, Art Dunlop would be across the river by now, heading toward the Double O with some of the ranchers from north of the Canadian. What troubled him was that by the time night fell it would be hard to track the Langers and Ring. By morning they might be miles away. Worse than that, if the Langers caught up with Ring first they would cheat Clint out of what he'd come here for.

And if Ring got away from the Langers? He'd follow him now, if it took him down into Mexico and another two years to do it.

After the first volley of shots the Double O riders had left

their horses and had taken cover among the various outbuildings. There had been about ten of them, near as Clint could tell. He saw a face peer cautiously from a small window in the barn loft. He didn't like killing the man. Clint felt his argument was with Ring and the Langers. These men had done him no direct harm. But he knew the folly of believing they felt the same way. He took quick aim and saw the face disappear when he fired.

The shot brought an answering volley from the hidden gunmen. Glass showered inside the bunkhouse and there was a chunking sound as bullets buried themselves in the far wall. Clint huddled beneath the window ledge. Someone behind him shuddered. He turned to find Annette crouching so close that her knees touched his back.

"Scared?" he asked gently. Then he noticed she had a rifle.

She shook her head vigorously. "No," she said, but he noticed her lips were taut. Then he understood why. "I—I've never seen a man killed before, that's all."

Clint nodded in understanding. "It's not a nice thing to watch. But," and he shrugged his shoulders, "it's them or us."

"I know," she said quietly.

Mal Turpin called from the other end of the single room. "Clint, there's two or three of 'em just dodged behind that little shed out there. I can't reach 'em from here. But if I move it'll leave this end unprotected. Can you watch 'em?"

Sadie spoke up. "I'll go."

Clint stopped her. "Stay where you are, Sadie. Somebody might try to creep up on us through those cottonwoods on your side. I'll see what I can do about covering both sides here."

Annette put a hand on his arm. "Go ahead, Clint. I—I'll watch over here."

He looked at her for a moment, almost in disbelief. Then he saw the look in her eyes and something stirred inside him. She was trying to show him that she was a woman who could hold her own in this wild country.

There was a sound of running footsteps outside. Clint jerked his head above the window ledge. A Double O rider had leaped from behind the closest outbuilding. It was hard

to see him against the blazing background of the setting sun. But Clint could see what he held in his hand, high above his head. The man had tied some rags to a stick and dipped them in coal oil or pitch. Even as he watched, Clint saw the man draw back his arm to throw.

Clint was in an awkward position. Before he could shift his balance and bring his rifle to bear he heard a shot, saw the man slump, dropping the blazing torch. Then he heard the resolute click as Annette levered a new cartridge into the chamber of the Winchester she held.

"I'll be alright, Clint," she said softly. "You cover the back."

Clint nodded and crawled back to where he could watch the men Mal had told him about. He heard Annette crying softly behind him but he didn't turn around. After the first shock had passed she would be alright. He watched the shed behind the bunkhouse.

It was nearly half an hour later before anyone spoke. Then Mal commented quietly, "Sun's gettin' mighty low."

No one answered him, but they all knew what he meant. If help didn't come before darkness settled . . .

Almost as though in answer to Mal's comment there was a disturbance among the Double O riders. Shouts and whistles rang out. Shadowy figures darted behind buildings, through the trees.

"They're leaving," Clint said. "Somebody must be coming. Art must have made it."

"I can see them!" Annette said excitedly. "They're coming down across the slope, seven or eight of them. And it looks like Art Dunlop's white hair on the man in the lead."

"Hold your fire," Clint told them. "No sense in aimless killing. Those men won't be back to bother us. Not after this day is over."

There was the sound of hoofbeats that faded quickly as the Double O men departed in the direction from which they'd come. Soon the sound of horses came from the opposite direction as the ranchers from above the river came pounding into the yard. Clint opened the door and stepped out.

"Who's that yonder?" Art yelled at him, pulling the roan to a stop and pointing in the direction of the fleeing riders.

"Let them go," Clint said, grinning at the sight of the old man's eager face.

The two girls and Mal Turpin stepped out behind Clint. "You boys couldn't have picked a better time to visit this place," Mal grinned.

Pete Wieborn got down and came over to Clint, holding out his hand. "Driskill," he said huskily, "ain't no sense in my apologizin'. I just want to say thanks for wakin' us up in time."

Clint shook hands with him and then with Jake Martin who had come forward silently. Jeb Ash pointed toward the smoldering house. "Looks like the Double O got a dose of their own medicine," he said, unsmiling.

Clint told them how it had happened.

"Then Ring and the Langers all got away?" Pete Wieborn asked, disappointment in his voice.

Clint had slipped his own rifle from its boot and was checking the load. "So far they have," he said evenly. "But I'm going after them as soon as I can get my feet into a pair of stirrups." He walked toward the corral and mounted a likely looking chestnut. He rode over to the others.

"We'll go with you, Clint," Jake Martin told him.

"All right," Clint agreed. "But I'm leaving now. The rest of you'd better come along when your horses are rested. I want to get as far along as I can before it's completely dark."

Mal Turpin rode up alongside. Clint noticed the red-head had saddled a fresh mount. "Can't leave me behind now," Turpin grinned.

Annette Cober came up to Clint. "Be careful," she said huskily, laying her hand on top of his. Clint felt the pressure of her fingers. "I'll be back," he said gently, and there was a note of promise in his voice.

Clint and Mal swung out of the yard and soon picked up the three sets of tracks. At the edge of the hills on the far side of the valley Clint looked toward the setting sun. "Soon be dark," he commented.

"Be a full moon later on," Mal reminded him.

"We'll need it," Clint said dryly. "Ring won't be stopping to make camp tonight. And the Langers won't either. They'll be traveling fast, too."

"They got to stop sometime," Mal said.

They kept the pace as fast as possible, stopping only where the trail crossed rock to make sure the tracks didn't change direction. It was well past midnight when Mal came alongside and pointed ahead. "Looks like something might've happened up there."

Clint looked and saw what the redhead meant. Dark, winged shadows hovered over the silvered humps of the rolling hills, swooping down to join others already on the ground.

"Could be a dead animal of some kind," Clint said.

"Maybe so," Mal replied.

But both of them knew, as they rode toward the spot, that it wasn't an animal they'd find there.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE VULTURES took wing as the horsemen drew near. Clint and Mal Turpin lingered only long enough to identify the man on the ground as Cal Langer. He was not a pretty sight. Vultures work quickly.

"Who do you suppose did it?" Clint asked when they were mounted again.

"Now that you mention it," Mal mused, rubbing his chin, "I wonder myself. Seems pretty soon for them to have caught up with Ring."

"It could have been that Stub Langer figured he could get along pretty well on that money without Cal to help him spend it," Clint said.

"He could always blame it on Ring," Mal agreed. "Still, you'd think Stub would have waited at least until they'd caught up with Ring. Two of them would stand a better chance against one."

Clint smiled grimly. "Maybe," he said, "Stub was afraid the same thing might happen to him and just wasn't taking any chances."

"Could be you're right," Mal nodded.

Dawn found them still on the trail, weary, haggard, eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep. They were climbing now, through fairly rocky country.

The rocky ground made the trail harder to follow. It also made the possibility of sudden ambush an ever-present threat. Clint had counted on sighting their quarry by daylight, but the nature of the terrain made that almost impossible. Stopping by a waterhole they saw tracks, fresh tracks, in the mud. Tracks of two horses, one a little older than the other.

"Shouldn't be too long now," Mal observed, nodding toward the tracks.

Clint said nothing. He'd thought that before, too. He'd thought it that first day when he'd drawn rein at the edge of the rimrock and first looked down on the broad, flat valley of the Canadian. He'd thought it only the day before when they'd ridden into the Double O headquarters. Now, he wasn't sure any more.

They mounted again, followed the tracks till they lost them in rocky ground. The slope was steeper here, and there were boulders and rock slabs strewn about. Clint drew his Winchester and balanced it across the pommel in front of him.

Mal Turpin followed suit. There was an uneasiness in the air.

Though they had been half-expecting it to happen, it was still a surprise when it came. And the spot was a bad one. They were on a narrow trail, skirting the side of a narrow canyon, when the shot came.

Clint was in the lead. The slug snapped past his ear, splintered pieces from a rock slab behind and went whining off down the canyon. There was no shelter, the rock slab was flat with no outcroppings. There was but one thing to do.

"Ride for it!" Clint yelled, clapping his heels to the roan.

He heard the clatter of iron-shod hoofs on rock as Mal followed. The chestnut heaved and groaned in protest at the steepness of the grade. Clint alternately swore and prayed under his breath at their helplessness. Twenty yards ahead twin boulders jutted from the side of the slope. It was a long twenty yards, upgrade.

Something tugged at his sleeve, and the sound of the shot followed. He scanned the rocks ahead through squinted eyes, searching for sign of gunsmoke. He saw it, then it was gone, eddied away on the swift breeze. No chance to tell just where it came from. But the distance was great. He thanked his lucky stars that Stub Langer—he was sure it was Stub—had let impatience ride his trigger. Had the man waited until they had passed the boulders, another twenty yards . . .

Clint sent the chestnut scrambling up behind the first boulder and swung down. Poking the rifle ahead of him he peered around the base of the rock. A puff of smoke blossomed momentarily up the slope. Clint fired twice, saw the shots strike low, kicking up little spurts of shale dust.

The sound of his own shots had drowned Mal's cry of pain. Clint swung around to look for the redhead just in time to see him pitch from the saddle. There was blood on the front of his shirt below the shoulder. Another shot thudded solidly into Mal's mount. The animal reared, whinnying with pain, and fell scrambling down the slope.

Mal's head came up and he looked at Clint. "Stay there, dammit! Don't come out from behind that rock. Can't you see that's just what he's waitin' . . ."

A slug ripped into the gravel in front of Mal's face, cutting off his words. Clint was beside him, half-carrying, half dragging him up the slope. Langer was shooting too quickly, overanxious. The bullets pounded harmlessly into the gravel around them.

Clint examined Mal's shoulder in the shelter of the rock. "That doesn't look good, Mal," he said tersely.

"Hell, I'm all right!" the redhead grinned. He still had his rifle. "I can shoot left-handed." But Clint saw the whiteness of the man's face and the beads of sweat on his forehead that didn't come from the sun.

"Let's get shootin'," Mal said, rising to one elbow. Then his face contorted with pain and he went suddenly limp. Clint picked up his own rifle again. It was better, he figured, that Mal had passed out. That shoulder wound looked painful.

Clint took time out to reload, thankful that he'd brought extra ammunition. Peering around the boulder again, he tried to size up the situation. One thing was certain. It would be a fight to the finish. With Mal wounded, and only one horse, it would be sure death for them to try to back down the way they'd come. And, as far as he could judge, Stub Langer had left himself no way out. There was nothing behind the hidden gunman but open slope. Apparently the former Double O foreman had counted on making his first shots count. Clint settled down to wait. The man from

Wyoming pulled tobacco from his shirt and leisurely rolled a cigarette, keeping one eye cocked on the slope ahead.

Mal Turpin groaned and opened his eyes. Clint lit the cigarette and stuck it between the redhead's lips. "I used clean spit to stick it together with," he said.

Mal made what would pass for a grin under the circumstances. "Thanks, Clint!" He puffed on the smoke, drawing it deeply into his lungs. Clint watched closely, looking for telltale red flecks on the redhead's lips. None came. Clint let out a breath of relief. At least the slug hadn't punctured a lung like he'd first feared. He'd let Mal finish the smoke, then he'd try to clean up the wound a little.

"He sure picked a good spot to nail us down," Mal said weakly.

"Pinned himself down, too," Clint tried to make it sound cheerful.

"He can't back out without giving me a clean shot at him. We'll just sit here awhile. The others will be along before nightfall. We'll have Stub Langer like a rabbit in a hollow log."

Mal smoked in silence for a while. Then he asked, "What about Ring? You're not gettin' any closer to him."

Clint shrugged his shoulders. "I've waited over two years. I can wait a few more days."

Mal thought that over for a bit. Then he said, "There's no reason why I can't keep Langer pinned down here until the others come along. If you can make it back down the trail you could take out after Ring again."

Clint shook his head. "He'd plug me before I got ten yards away." Then he reached over and took the short cigarette out of Mal's fingers. "Let's get a look at that shoulder."

Mal winced as Clint tore away the shirt. He looked at the wound, then turned the redhead's shoulder gently for a look at the back. There was a bigger hole there. "The slug passed through, that's one good thing. I only wish I had some whisky to pour on that."

Mal tried to grin. "You'd like to hear me yell, wouldn't you?"

Clint laughed. "For wasting good whisky?"

The whine of a slug glancing off the boulder cut their conversation.

Clint picked up his rifle and watched the rocks on the slope. If Langer got cocky and showed himself, maybe they could get out of here. At least he could take Mal back to meet the others and pick up Ring's trail that much sooner. But apparently Langer had no such idea.

Long shadows were creeping down the little canyon when Clint caught a movement on the rise a mile or so behind. His heartbeat quickened as a rider appeared, then another and still another. There were six altogether. Clint guessed that Art Dunlop had stayed behind to take Annette and Sadie back to town. He watched as the riders came on in the slow, jogging gait of men with a long trail ahead.

When they were a quarter of a mile away and still hidden from Langer by a bend in the trail, Clint stood up behind the rock. He held his rifle high and waved it to get their attention. Finally an answering wave showed they'd spotted him. Clint turned quickly and pumped four shots toward the rocks upslope to let them know what was up. When he looked back again he saw the riders gathered for consultation. Then they broke up and spread out to close in on the spot from different directions. All except one. He kept on toward the spot where Clint and Mal lay behind the boulder.

From the distance the rider looked like Jake Martin. Clint wasn't sure. He tried to wave the man back, pointing to the rocks where Stub Langer waited. But Jake only waved back and kept on coming. Clint groaned and turned to watch the rocks up ahead.

"What's the matter?" Mal asked.

"The others have caught up with us," Clint told him.

"They have? Good!"

"It would be, except that Jake Martin is riding right into the same trap we did and I can't stop him."

Mal swore under his breath. "Big as Jake is, Langer can't possibly miss him."

Clint reloaded, signalled again to Jake to go back, then turned and levered four more shots in the general direction

of Stub Langer. He saw answering puffs of smoke from the rocks and ducked back. This time, though, there was no sound of ricocheting. He spun around and saw the spurts of gravel kick up beside Jake. The big man spurred his mount and sent it stumbling up the narrow trail toward them.

"Damn fool!" Clint swore. There was nothing he could do now except try to hold Langer down until Jake made the shelter of the rock. Clint began firing at the puffs of smoke. Langer had holed up well. In the dark mottled rock it was hard even to see the opening through which he'd poked his rifle. Clint kept firing until the pin clicked on an empty chamber. As he started to reload he heard a scrambling behind, turned in time to see Jake Martin swing down from his horse and crouch behind him.

Clint scowled at him. "For a man with a family you don't show good sense sometimes, Jake."

Jake grinned at him. "Hell, I figgered if you two could get up here without Langer hittin' either one of you, I could too!"

"That's just it," Mal said shortly. "We didn't."

Jake looked more closely at Mal, noticing his shoulder for the first time. He swallowed once and said quietly, "Well I'll be damned! And all along I figured you two was just out of range. I thought Mal here was just layin' back takin' it easy."

They laughed about it, then, but there was a tone of relief in Jake's laughter. "Langer's up among those rocks," Clint told him. "Can't get a good shot at him from here, but one thing's certain."

"You mean, he can't get away?" Jake asked.

Clint nodded. "It won't be long now, with those other boys closing in on him from all sides."

"You saw Cal, I suppose?" Jake asked. "Or what was left of him?"

Clint nodded again. "I reckon Brother Stub had something to do with that."

"That's the way we figgered it," Jake told him. "We stopped long enough to dig a hole for him."

"That was decent of you," Clint said.

Mal tried to push himself to his elbows, wincing at the pain. "Wait a minute," Jake told him. "I've got some whisky in my little canteen."

"You carry whisky instead of water?" Clint asked, surprised.

Jake grinned at him. "I carry two canteens. A big one full of water in case I want to wash my face or somethin', and a little one full of whisky."

Mal looked inquiringly at Jake. "You aim to apply that internally, or externally?"

"A little of both." Jake crouched close to the big boulder and walked over to his mount. Then he gave a low gasp of disappointment. "Why the dirty son of a—look at that! A bullet hole right through it. Every last drop gone!" He turned away in disgust.

Mal lay back on the ground. "I should've knowed better than to get my hopes up," he said resignedly.

Clint called their attention to the slope ahead. "They're closing in on him," he said quietly. "I don't think he's seen them yet. He probably thinks we're the only three around here."

"I can't understand," Jake mused, "why Stub Langer bothered to waste all this time like this."

Clint said, "I guess he didn't like being in the middle. Besides, he's pretty sure of catching up with Ring sooner or later. It looked worth his while, I imagine, to spend a little time to make sure he wouldn't be followed any more."

A sudden volley of shots sounded among the rocks up ahead. Clint and Jake looked out from behind the rock that sheltered them. "Sounds like he's spotted them!" Clint said.

There was silence for a while. Clint ran his eyes over the slope but could see no sign of movement. "Do you suppose they got him?"

As though in answer to his question there came the sound of a single shot. It was not the sharp snap of a rifle as previously. Clint and Jake exchanged puzzled glances. "Nobody's within pistol range of him up there," Clint said.

"You don't suppose he's sneaked out of there some way while we been talkin', do you?" Jake asked.

Clint moved his head from side to side. "Nope. We'd have seen him if he had."

They waited a little longer. Nothing moved anywhere along the slope. Five minutes passed. Still no movement. Finally a man appeared, crawling on his belly from the shelter of one rock to the other.

"That's one of Jeb Ash's men," Jake said.

They watched the lone figure, creeping slowly across the face of the slope. "He's getting mighty close!" Clint said, shifting his rifle uneasily in his hand.

They saw the man stop, peering intently ahead of him. Then he stood up and began to walk cautiously forward, his rifle held ready before him. "Somethin's happened," Jake commented, "or else he wouldn't be walkin' out in the open like that."

Just then the man turned and waved his hand. Two other riders came out of hiding and joined him. Clint and Jake left the shelter of the boulder and were running up the slope.

"Watch your step, Jake," Clint cautioned. "It might be some kind of a trick. Stub Langer's as tricky as a snake and twice as low."

"I'm watchin' it," Jake told him.

They came up beside the others, all of whom had come out of hiding by now. Pete Wieborn was saying, "It's a damn shame. I'd like to have had the chance myself."

"What happened?" Jake asked, looking around.

Pete Wieborn pointed to a deep saucer-like depression among the rocks a few feet away. Clint had guessed rightly, Stub had picked a good place to hole up. It would have been almost impossible to hit him from where they'd been pinned down.

But Stub Langer had fired his last shot. Now Clint understood the pistol shot he'd heard. Stub's .45 lay loosely in his outstretched hand. Blood was oozing thickly from a hole in the side of his head.

"Figured it was better than hanging, I guess," Clint said grimly. Then he turned to the others. "That only leaves one to go."

After they had rigged a travois to carry the wounded Mal, Clint turned to the other riders. "I'm much obliged to you men for coming along. If you hadn't, no telling how Mal and me might have made out."

"You don't owe us no thanks," Pete Wieborn told him. "Matter of fact, we'll be beholdin' to you for a long time to come for pointin' out this nest of skunks to us."

"Sure you don't want a couple of us to go on with you?" Jake asked.

Clint declined the offer again. "Thanks just the same, Jake. But you fellows have got work to do back on the Canadian. Besides, no telling how long it'll take me to catch up with this Ring."

He walked over to the travois behind Jake's horse. Mal, trussed like a Comanche papoose, grinned at him sheepishly. "Lot of help I turned out to be!"

Clint took the redhead's good hand and shook it. "Take care of yourself, old-timer. And thanks for sticking with me."

"You coming back this way, Clint?" Pete Wieborn asked. "We need good men in this country."

Clint studied the toe of his boot for a minute before he answered. Then he smiled and looked up. "I'll be back," he said quietly. "I've got some unfinished business to attend to at the Double O."

Nobody asked him what he meant exactly, but they exchanged knowing grins. "But first of all," Clint said soberly, "I've got to finish the job I came here to do."

He swung aboard the chestnut and turned away up the trail. At the top of the rise he reined in and turned to wave. The men on the slope waved back and watched him disappear over the other side.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE MOON was well down that night when Clint drew rein beside a willow thicket near a creek. He unrolled the bedding and was able to keep his eyes open just long enough to make sure his .45 was beneath his head and the Winchester by his side. Then he slept.

Not until the shade of the willows receded far enough to let through the heat of the sun did he stir. Then he got up, sloshed his face with creek water and dressed. The Winchester netted him a prairie chicken which he spitted over a fire. He was wishing he'd had time to provision. Living off the land would slow him down considerable.

Back in the saddle again, he found the sleep had refreshed him. Weariness had gone, replaced by eagerness to close his bargain. Ahead, not too far, he knew, lay a place called Amarillo. He would get word of Ring there. Sooner or later he'd meet a man who'd met the man he followed.

Men came and went in Amarillo, he found that night, and nobody bothered to ask where or why. Morning again found him pushing southwest, but more westerly than south. There were mountains in the New Mexico Territory, and a man could lose himself there. Clint remembered when the man he knew as Cober had lost himself in the mountains of western Wyoming.

Clint Driskill was not the same man who had left the Canadian some three days before. He had provisioned himself in Amarillo. But lightly, in the manner of a man who must travel fast and far. Tobacco, beans, and buffalo jerky. One small pot for the beans. He was a mechanical thing, now, concerned only with time and distance—and covering as much of the latter with the least possible of the former. At the end was a man.

When he came to the trading post on the river that morning there was a chill in the air. An old man, face pinched, looked up when Clint walked in.

Clint wasted no words. "I'm to join a man who might have passed by this way not too long since. Big man. Not too young, but not old. Swarthy of face, maybe with a beard like mine. Probably on a sorrel with a Double O brand, like on the chestnut out there. Unless he's traded it off since I saw him last. Have you seen him?"

The old man fingered his white stubble of beard, and wandered creakily toward the rear of the store.

"Lemme see," he said. "Wait just a minute and I'll be able to tell you."

The old man vanished behind a heavy curtain that closed off the rear section of the store. After what seemed an hour, he reappeared, nodding apologetically.

"Memory's not so good no more," he said. "Had to look at my records, see if I'd remember from them. And I do recall the man—bought two pound of bacon. Passed through yesterday."

Clint tried to keep the excitement from showing on his face. He hadn't hoped he'd be this close.

"Know if he figured on bedding down around here a night or so?" Clint asked.

"I reckon so," the old man dismissed the subject. "Aim to settle hereabouts?"

"Settle?" Yes, Clint thought, he'd settle a lot. But he dodged the question. "I've never been here before. I'm just following. My friend seems to have some ideas about settling here though." He waited, hoping that would bring a response. It did.

"Seemed to be interested in cattle quite a bit. Asked if there was any big outfits close by. Said he might like to buy into a spread."

That would be Ring alright, Clint was thinking. Feeling his way with big talk about "buying in." More than likely he figured he'd come far enough now to be safe.

"Not many towns hereabouts are there?" Clint asked casually.

The old man laughed. "A few Indian towns. That's about

all. A man could get lost most anyplace around here and nobody'd ever find him."

"That's what I figured," Clint said, more to himself than to the old man. Ring would like to lose himself for a while. That talk about buying into a spread was just to find out how sparsely settled this country was. Clint turned to go.

"Need any provisions?"

Clint shook his head. "Not right now. I'll be back this way, though." And soon, too, he thought.

The country, for the most part, was barren. The mountains were only a promise in the distance. Clint figured that another half a day's ride would be about as close as he'd ever get to them. As close as Ring would get.

A thought occurred to him suddenly, and he wondered that it hadn't happened before. All along he'd counted on killing Ring, once he got close enough to do it. It might happen, mightn't it, he thought, that you could be the one to get killed?

He glanced about him as he rode along. He wouldn't like to die here. Here in this strange country where there were few men to ever know about it. It wouldn't help his wife any, or the unborn child, if he should die.

And there was Annette Cober. She might wait for word of him for a time, then she'd probably figure he'd gone on back to Wyoming. That would be a big joke—for Ring. A big joke. Clint Driskill's bones bleaching out here within sight of the same mountains he'd left a thousand miles to the north. And Ring laughing like hell at the joke!

Fresh sign of a horse caught his eye and the thought left his mind. If the old man had spoken the truth, that would be Ring's horse that had left the sign. He glanced at the sun. Not yet noon. Tonight, maybe.

There was a purple haze over the peaks on the horizon when Clint saw the moving speck. Even at that distance there was no denying that it was horse and rider. Clint halted the chestnut for a time, and sat watching the dot on that mammoth waste. The dot that was Arch Ring. It had been over two years since he had seen the man. It gave him

a strange feeling to think that he had been closer to him than this along the Canadian, but had never seen him.

Clint wasn't sure what he had expected to feel when this time finally came. Surely he hadn't expected the calmness that came over him. So calm that it almost scared him. And an idea came to him with the calmness. A plan that was so simple he didn't think it would work, at first. But the more he thought of it, the more it appealed to him. He nodded to himself and said aloud, "That's it. That's the way I want it."

He urged the chestnut into an easy lope that ate up distance but tired neither horse nor rider. To the north he swung, in a wide arc, then bore gradually west. Now and then, as he topped a rise, he could see the moving dot—a little ahead, now beside him, now falling behind. But always far away.

A snaky shadow told him where water lay just at the edge of the foothills. There were trees there, he could see the dark green clusters. He would camp there, and make a fire. One that could be seen for miles around. One that would tempt a lonely man to investigate in search of companionship. Even men like Ring, he guessed, could feel loneliness.

Clint built the fire in a clearing, where it could be seen. He laid out his bedroll carefully, set his pan of beans beside the fire. Then he waited, patiently, easily, drawing on a cigarette and straining his ears into the gathering night.

Once he got up to throw more wood on the fire, and as he did so it came to him that he should have heard the sound of hoofs by now. But—maybe he was getting overanxious. Still, he let his eyes wander around the limit of firelight in the clearing. He did it casually, like a man might take in the scenery. He saw nothing.

The fire started to die down again and he began to think maybe he'd made a mistake. He'd tried to keep his face down as much as he could, to avoid recognition. Not that there was too much chance of Ring knowing him right off with the beard he'd grown. Still . . .

The chestnut gave a sudden snort and stood, head raised, ears pricked, looking past him, across the fire. Clint kept his head down like he hadn't noticed, but he let his eyes

run quickly over the shadows. His face was a mask, but inside he cursed the pounding of blood in his head that kept him from hearing if there had been a sound.

The chestnut relaxed, went back to cropping at the grass carpet along the bank. Clint eased a little. It could have been a night-prowler, a cougar maybe, come down from the foothills to prey on the water holes along the creek.

But it wasn't a cougar. Or any other animal—except, maybe, a human animal. Clint knew that as soon as he heard the sound.

It was the snap of a dry twig. And it was close in. Closer than a night-prowler would come to a dying fire. It was the dry, quick snap a twig makes when a heavy boot presses down on it.

Clint cursed himself for a fool. The plan had been too damn simple! He'd counted on Ring walking up, cautious maybe, but not expecting any real trouble. The beard would hide Clint's identity—until he called the man *Cober*. Ring would know the voice, then. There'd be nothing for him to do but draw. Too damn simple!

A man without suspicion wouldn't come sneaking in. Not this close.

The snap of the twig had come from behind. Clint felt little cold quills play up and down his backbone. But better he didn't turn around. Better he should let Ring's suspicions ease off. Maybe the man would figure the situation was harmless after all, when he'd had a close look.

All of a sudden Clint felt a sickness in his belly when he thought of the chestnut. The horse wasn't so far away that Ring couldn't see the Double O brand in the firelight. *Damn! Damn you, Clint! All these years and all these miles and you have to wind up with your back to the man you've come to kill, and not able to turn or move lest you get killed yourself!*

Something moved across the clearing. It was just the faintest kind of movement. There was a dull glint of firelight on blued steel. Just a faint glimpse of a leathered face, wrinkled and peering behind a stubbly white beard above the twin barrels of the shotgun. Then the bushes closed in

again and the face was hidden. Clint knew that face: it was the old man from the trading post.

So he'd talked himself right into it! The old trader must have had Ring hidden right behind that blanket in the rear of the store when Clint had walked in. And while Clint waited for the old man to "look at his records," the two had set this trap for him.

He might have known Ring would have a hole card. This was country Ring had roamed before the Langers had run across him in San Antone that time. But it came to him that he'd taken too long to think about it. Too damn long. And now here he was with Ring somewhere at his back and the old-timer with the scattergun sitting there in front of him.

He stood up, hoping he wasn't moving too quickly. It had to look natural, just like he didn't suspect a thing. But it had to be quick, too.

Clint stretched, yawned, walked slowly toward his bed-roll. He stopped to kick a piece of wood that was falling off the fire. Then he bent down and fumbled in his bedding. His hand closed over the box of cartridges he'd bought in Amarillo. He pulled his hand out as though it was empty, holding it low against the side of his boot as he squatted.

The move had taken him around the heap of glowing coals—out of the sights of the old man's shotgun, and closer to where he figured Ring would come out of the brush. He squatted as though staring into the hot coals, but out of the corner of his eyes he watched the brush. It would have to be done quickly, as soon as Ring stepped out.

Then he heard Ring move quietly forward out of the brush. As if tossing a stick at the fire, Clint threw the box of cartridges. He was dangerously close, but that was one chance he'd have to take.

"Howdy, Driskill—you been looking for me? I hear . . ."

A shower of fire exploded in all directions. The air was suddenly filled with the popping of rifle cartridges. Shielding his eyes against the cascade of embers, Clint whirled and drew from his crouched position.

But something had gone wrong. Ring had managed to

get back into the brush, and Clint found himself levelling his gun at nothing. Then the shotgun boomed.

As the shot whooshed by him, inches away, Clint spun and dropped on one knee. He swung his gun toward the white-bearded face moving out of the gloom; he triggered in the same motion, the gun bucked in his hand, and the face seemed to crumple.

Clint watched the old man stumble forward and fall in a heap on his gun. Then, as he watched, came a sharp pistol crack. An arrowing pain seized Clint by the shoulder and flung him, belly down, into the coals of the fire.

Out of a world of burning, searing pain, Clint groped for his gun, found only the agony of red-hot coals and the smell of his scorched flesh. Coals, he thought dully, the fire he had built to lure Ring to his death. Somewhere behind him, he knew, Ring was moving in on him, slowly, surely, finger on trigger. The trap had worked, Clint thought in one wild foolish thought, only the wrong man was going to die.

And then he got up, his right hand aching so much he couldn't stand it, except he had to. Dizzily, he turned his head, trying to find Ring behind the mists of swirling pain that danced impishly all about and would not be still.

Ring's laugh, harsh and mirthless, dissolved the mist. Clint saw him clear and true, the face expressionless behind the laugh, the gun held level. And then Clint swung his right arm, throwing the huge chunk of hell-hot coal he had been clutching ever since he crawled out of the ashes, throwing it straight into Ring's face.

What happened after that was a red-misted nightmare. Clint remembered the crunch of bone as one of his fists found Ring's face and sent the man down. Then Ring was up again, a gun held waveringly in his hand. And, finally, they were straining, wrestling together, and there was the crack of the gun, and Ring slumped in his arms.

After that, all Clint remembered was crawling off and burrowing deep into the moist, cool earth until pain and consciousness left his body in one sighing gasp.

It was still night when the pain came back strongly and brought Clint upright, pain and the sound of a man's voice

that hardly sounded like it came from a man any longer. Clint stared first at his blackened hands, and then at the two bodies, one inert, the other wanting to crawl, it seemed, but just shaking instead. It was Ring, what was left of him.

Clint got up and stumbled over to his own bedding; painfully he pulled a can of saddle grease and a shirt from the roll. He smeared the grease over the raw burns on his hands and arms, then bound them up crudely with strips torn from the shirt. Lastly, he bandaged the less painful gun wound in his shoulder.

Then, with the ache of his body only half soothed, Clint got up and walked to where Ring lay. He stood looking down at the man and he had the feeling he'd been cheated. Ring wasn't dead, and Clint knew he couldn't shoot this man where he lay—much as he deserved it.

Ring raised himself on an elbow, one hand probing clumsily at the gaping wound in his chest. He looked down at the blood, sticky and warm on his fingers. Terror, glazing now, was in his eyes as he looked up at Clint. "I—I'll die, Driskill!" he cried hoarsely. "I'm goin' to die!"

"I know," Clint said quietly.

There was nothing to do now but wait.

An hour or so later the fever started. Clint brought the man water, watched him drink thirstily, spilling it down his shirt front with shaky hands. Ring turned his tortured, pleading face toward Clint. "I—I don't want to die, Driskill. I'm afraid to die."

"Nobody wants to die," Clint said grimly. "My wife didn't want to die. Fred Cober didn't want to die."

"Don't talk like that, Driskill. Not now. I'm dyin' now. You got what you wanted."

Clint said nothing. He didn't like sitting there watching the man go this way. What else was there to do? he asked himself. Leave him to die alone?

"I've been afraid all my life," Ring rambled on. "When I was a kid I was always afraid. I don't know what of. But I was afraid of everythin' and everybody. I was a big kid, for my age. I found out I could bully the other kids to keep

them from doin' me hurt. It kept them off me, but still I was afraid.

"When I growed up and went to punchin' cattle I was always afraid somebody might try to do me hurt, might try to get me fired. I thought the only way was for me to try to make them afraid of me. It worked. So much that nobody would give me a job. Everybody was afraid of me. I had to do somethin' to live. I found out I could take money away from people, because they was afraid of me and my gun. The more I did that, the more I had to do it. Once you start that, you can't turn back. I went too far, Driskill, and now I'm dyin'. I was afraid to live and now I'm afraid to die. I . . . don't want to . . . to die . . . Driskill. I . . . I'm afraid . . . to . . . die . . . I . . ."

The man closed his eyes. His breathing grew labored. He moved his lips from time to time, but no words came. Clint turned away and rolled a cigarette to quiet his nerves. He knew what came next. He'd seen it before. The flecked, blue-red foam around the lips, the glassy, unbelieving stare. Clint lit the cigarette and walked over to squat by the fire where he wouldn't have to watch.

The grave Clint dug the next day was a shallow one, dug without tools. He wrapped the man's body in a blanket, covered it with loose earth. Standing there, looking down on the grave of the man he'd trailed so long, Clint realized that he should have felt good about the way it ended. But, though it was what he wanted and what had to be, he couldn't feel good. Just kind of numb.

He picked up his hat and walked over to where his horse and Ring's were cropping unconcernedly at the sparse grass. Then he mounted the chestnut, took the other horse to lead, and turned his back to the blue-hued mountains.

He had turned his back on something else, he felt. The years behind. They were gone. There were only the years ahead, now.

Two weeks later, his wounds almost healed, Clint rode into the yard at the Double O. He had expected to find activity here, men at work restoring the burned-out house. He

had expected to find new faces, new hands Annette would have hired. He had expected to find Annette.

Instead he found deserted outbuildings, an empty corral, and the blackened ruins of the house. The bunkhouse door was ajar, as they had left it the day of the gunfight. Weeds were sprouting beside the steps.

Still wondering at what he'd seen, Clint turned away and headed for town.

Art Dunlop sat behind the desk reading a month-old *Dallas Weekly*. Clint walked up and leaned over the counter. Art looked up at him.

"Somethin' for you, mister?"

Clint fingered the growth of beard covering his face, realizing Art wouldn't recognize him. "I'm looking for a girl named Cober. Annette Cober. Know where I can find her?"

"Clint Driskill!" Art grabbed Clint's hand and shook it till Clint thought he would shake it off. "It's good to see -- back, Clint--alive!"

"It's good to be back--alive."

Art's face sobered. "Did you find him, Clint?"

Clint nodded.

"Did you--is he dead?"

"Yes. He's dead."

Neither of them spoke for a while.

Finally Clint said, "I rode in by way of the Double O. Not a soul around. How come?"

Art shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, Clint. Annette ain't made a move to do anythin' with the place. A lot of people have offered to help. Her cattle's runnin' loose on the range with nobody to look after 'em." Then Art leaned over toward him. "I got a hunch, Clint, that she's been waitin' for word of you."

Clint shifted his feet self-consciously. "I thought I owed it to her to come back and help her build back up. It's partly my fault, what happened."

"She's upstairs, Clint. Been there ever since you left. Room Ten."

"Then I'd better shave and clean up before I go see her. Is my war sack still around?"

Art reached under the counter. "I rented your room right after you went after Ring. But I brought this down here to keep till you come after it."

Clint took the canvas bag and started toward the door at the back. Something crossed his mind, then, and he turned around. "Art, how's Sadie McGowan?"

Art slapped his hand on the counter. "Doggone! I plumb forgot to tell you. She and Mal Turpin got married a week ago. She sold out the livery stable and the two of them are livin' on Mal's place up the river."

"I'm glad to hear about that," Clint said. "They'll make a nice pair, those two."

He walked through the door at the back and into the bathhouse behind the kitchen. As he started to undress he smiled to himself. Maybe, he told himself, he'd just imagined the way Sadie had looked at him at times. He dug his razor out of the war sack and looked at himself in the mirror. And maybe it had just been the lonesomeness coming out in her.

As he tugged at the tough growth on his face he thought about Annette. It would be hard not to ask her to marry him. But it would look like he might be trying to marry into a ready-made cattle business. She'd need a foreman, though, to get started. Maybe, as time went by, he'd be able to save a little on his own. Then, if nothing changed his mind . . .

He stopped the razor stroke mid-way. This business of waiting for him to come back. Maybe she'd just been waiting to hear what happened to the man who killed her father. Maybe she'd go back East after that. The thought disturbed him. But it was hard to get around. She'd had a lot of misfortune since she'd come to the Panhandle. And the way she'd let the Double O go untended looked like she didn't care what happened to it.

Clint bathed hurriedly, then he crawled into clean clothes and went back inside the hotel. He dumped his war sack beside the desk and asked Art, "Say, whatever happened to my cow and my roan horse now that Sadie's sold out?"

"She and Mal took 'em both up to their place when Sadie moved."

"That's good of them," Clint said appreciatively.

"You goin' upstairs now?" Art asked.

Clint nodded.

"She'll be glad to see you, son."

Clint wondered, as he climbed the stairs, just how glad. He walked down the hall and stopped outside Room Ten. Then he lifted his hand and knocked gently.

"Who is it?" Her voice sounded tired, Clint thought. Tired of this country and everything that had happened to her in it.

"It's me. Clint."

The door opened quickly. She stood there, looking at him for a minute. Neither of them spoke right away. She looked tired, he thought. Awful tired. Then he noticed tears in her eyes.

"Clint!" she exclaimed softly. "Oh, Clint, thank heaven you're back!"

When he just stood there without saying anything, she stood aside. "Come in, Clint. I—I'd like to talk to you. I've been waiting all these weeks to talk to you. I—I knew you'd come back."

He went inside the room then, and she closed the door behind him.

"I suppose," he began, "that you've waited to hear word of the man who killed your father?"

"You killed him? You killed Ring?"

Clint nodded. "It had to be, Annette."

She covered her face with her hands for a minute. Then she drew a breath and looked up at him. "Yes," she sighed, "I can understand it—now. I'm glad it's over."

Clint swallowed hard as he thought of how best to put what he had to say. "Annette, I feel that I'm partly responsible for your house being burned and your place being neglected. If I hadn't stirred up all this trouble, maybe you'd still have your house. But I want to ask you a question about . . ."

"Yes, Clint!"

The suddenly bright expression on her face puzzled him a little. But he went on with what he had to say. "The least I could do is help you build everything back up. Maybe if

you could take me on as foreman—until everything got straightened out, that is!"

He felt he didn't want to push himself on her. For all he knew, she had other plans.

Annette turned and walked slowly toward the window. She stood looking out for a long time before she spoke without turning around.

"Is that all I mean to you, Clint? Just someone you feel you owe a moral obligation?"

Clint moved across the room and stood beside her. "Annette, I . . ."

She turned around. "Because if it is, I'm not staying in this country. I'd hoped you—you loved me, Clint. That's the only reason I waited. I had learned to hate this place, Clint. It took my father away from me. It made me afraid to trust people for the first time in my life. Then—then you came along. I could have been happy here with you, Clint. You made me feel that people weren't all bad after all. You seemed to be such a part of the Southwest—a part of the way I'd always dreamed it would be when I came out here."

She turned her face up to his. Clint put his arm gently about her waist. "Annette, the first time I saw you I knew I wanted to marry you. But I can't ask you to do that. It wouldn't be fair."

"You mean—there's someone else?"

He shook his head. "I mean it wouldn't be right because I can't offer you a thing. It would look like I . . ."

"Like you were marrying me for what I had?"

Clint nodded. "That's it," he said quietly.

She turned and pulled his other arm around her waist. She was smiling now through her tears. "Clint," she said softly, "all I want is you. And a son who looks like you. The rest doesn't matter. Besides," she laughed, laying her head on his chest, "who said you haven't anything to offer? Didn't you bring a cow, all the way from Wyoming for somebody named Cober? Don't you stick by your bargains?"

"Lady," Clint said as he pulled her toward him, "you've just got yourself a cow!"

"And a husband," she murmured as she raised her lips to his.

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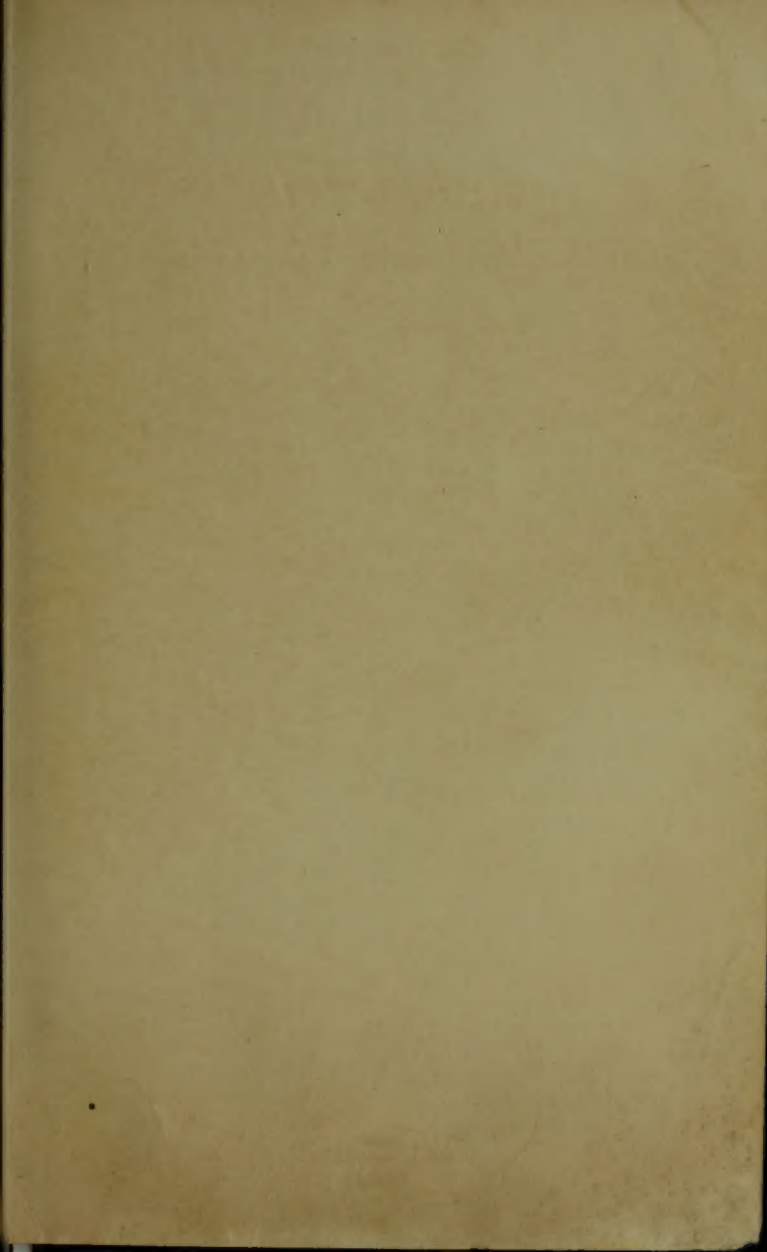
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